




**In the Footsteps
of
Mahatma...
Gandhi and Sanitation**

Sudarshan Iyengar



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To,

Shreekant,

There is more to toilet cleaning
than meets the eye!

Prologue

We, the people of India, need to work very hard to keep our home, neighbourhood and environment clean. We are yet to internalise the meaning of sanitation and hygiene and practice it diligently. Our two most excruciating disgraces are open defecation and manual scavenging. Both must stop with immediate effect. Designing schemes for building toilets and for ameliorating manual scavengers have not borne adequate results. Sanitation and Hygiene related illiteracy is widely prevalent. Education for sanitation and hygiene to all classes of citizens in the country is *sin'e qua non*.

Gandhiji in his times had realised and internalised the problem with utmost sensitivity and sensibility. He provided exemplary leadership in the matter. He had also raised a strongly related issue of attitude and behaviour of the society towards the groups that were involved in scavenging and sanitation work. He wanted the evil practice of untouchability to go completely from the society. He identified himself with such communities and embraced them. The attitude and behaviour of people in society towards such communities has been changing but at relatively low pace. Constitutional safeguards in Independent India have come to the rescue of people belonging to Scheduled Castes against repression and atrocities. What has been achieved in removing untouchability and treating all as equal is significant, but what still remains to be done is substantial.

Gandhiji relentlessly strived for improvement in sanitation in homes and habitations, and streets and public places all his life. He worked with conviction for removal of untouchability from the society. A

revisit to Gandhiji's work and the ideas he expressed still have potential to guide us. Hence this book.

The idea for this book germinated in several discussions that I had with Publications Division for the past one year. This was during the launch of the e-version of Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), a project with which I was associated as a member of the expert committee. The idea would not have culminated into this book, if not for the persistent persuasion of Dr Sadhana Rout, for which I am thankful. I have received support from many persons in writing the book. The major source for the title has been the digitised version of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG). Ms. Dina Patel's singular commitment to the project has yielded fruits. Without the e version of CWMG, a book of this kind could not have been completed in such a short time. I am grateful to Dharini Mishra of Publications Division for coordinating this entire effort. Mr. Amarendra Pandey, Assistant Professor of English at Gujarat Vidyapith has been kind to go through the draft and help me with English in a very short time. Shri Uday Mahajan of Gandhi Research Foundation, Jalgaon has helped with the typesetting. National Gandhi Museum, New Delhi has provided photographs. My thanks to all. Nimisha, as always, has been the first reader with a critical eye. Laxmi has provided the moral support with patience. For all the shortcomings, I alone am responsible.

August 31, 2016

Sudarshan Iyengar

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Introduction

Paying tribute to the Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi, the fifteenth Prime Minister of India in his first Independence Day speech on August 15th, 2014, said the following from the ramparts of the Red Fort.

Brothers and sisters, it will be 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi in 2019... Mahatma Gandhi had cleanliness and sanitation closest to his heart. Can we resolve not to leave a speck of dirt in our village, city, street, area, school, temple, hospital, by 2019 when we celebrate 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi? This happens not just with the Government, but with public participation. That's why we have to do it together... Has it ever pained us that our mothers and sisters have to defecate in open? Whether dignity of women is not our collective responsibility? The poor womenfolk of the village wait for the night; until darkness descends, they can't go out to defecate. What bodily torture they must be feeling, how many diseases that act might engender. Can't we just make arrangements for toilets for the dignity of our mothers and sisters?... you must be getting shocked to hear the Prime Minister speaking of cleanliness and the need to build toilets from the ramparts of the Red Fort... The poor need respect and it begins with cleanliness. I, therefore, have to launch a 'clean India' campaign from 2nd October this year and carry it forward in 4 years. I want to make a beginning today itself and that is – all schools in the country should have toilets with separate toilets for girls. Only then our daughters will not be compelled to leave schools midway.¹

This must be a unique speech. Perhaps no other Indian Prime Minister has mentioned sanitation and toilets in the address to the nation on Independence Day. It only shows priority and rare commitment on the part of the Prime Minister of India to the cause of sanitation and hygiene. And where does he draw his inspiration from? He remembered Mahatma Gandhi on the

1. [http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/tag/speech/18 December, 2015](http://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/tag/speech/18%20December,%202015)

occasion and he suggested what else would be a better way to pay tribute to the Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi when 150 years of his birth will be celebrated in 2019. We the people of Bharat should respond to the clarion call of our Prime Minister and pay smallest of our tributes to the Father of Nation. We the people of Bharat have a long way to go in performing our duty in order to fulfil the promise we have made to ourselves in the Preamble to our Constitution on January 26th, 1950 – the Republic Day, to secure to all its citizens Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Unless, every citizen has access to clean and potable drinking water and adequate sanitation facility we will continue to be an unjust, un-liberated, and unequal society. Water and Sanitation (WATSAN) is most important for each and every citizen of our country. Indeed it is our collective responsibility to move towards *Swachhh* Bharat with sustainable WATSAN arrangement for all citizens.

There is considerably more to Gandhiji's idea of a *Swachhh* Bharat. Symbolising Gandhiji only with a broomstick in his hand would trivialise the *Yugapurusha*. Gandhiji wanted to see Bharat *Swachhh* –clean and cleansed, body and soul. He was distressed about the way we lived and maintained our inhabitations. In South Africa he realised that the British wielded sanitation and hygiene related issues as weapon against Indian labourers and free settlers to severely restrict their rights to live and earn livelihood as free citizen. Gandhiji found that many a time the government and the municipal officers condemned the Indians to unliveable and hostile locations. Gandhiji contested and confronted the municipal authorities and the government officials with ample proof that Indian communities lived with fairly good understanding of hygiene and maintained desirable levels of cleanliness and sanitation that was possible given the location and physical situations.² Nevertheless, Gandhiji also had understood that many among Indian communities did not have adequate sense of sanitation and hygiene. And he pointed this out to the Indian communities time and again and asserted that the communities should learn and improve. He had an opinion built on his understanding of India's

2. It is generally understood that Gandhiji mobilised the Indian communities and launched *Satyagraha* – a unique technique of non-violent protest to fight for the civil and citizenry rights. But when one studies the detailed engagements of Gandhiji with the Municipal authorities in Johannesburg or Durban or other towns and cities in South Africa, one realises that the petitions that were filed in most instances discussed the issue of sanitation and hygiene among Indians. Careful study of the volumes 1 to 13 of 'The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi' (CWMG) reveals that various documents such as petitions, letters, reports, etc., contain words such as sanitation (more than 100 times), insanitary and cleanliness (more than 60 times). Similarly, dozens of times words Latrine, Lavatory and hygiene also appear. Gandhiji carried this burden back home and throughout his writings later in India until he lived he raised issues related to sanitation and hygiene and in that context the issue of untouchability also. Subsequent Chapters focus on the subject.

history that one of the main reasons behind Indian communities losing sense of cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation was centuries of subjugation. The civility and culture were severely eroded and sanitation and hygiene was also a casualty.

Gandhiji also felt deeply hurt the way his countrymen treated communities who were condemned to handle filth and human excreta. The feelings had developed in childhood only. This is evident from an episode when once he told his mother that he had touched an untouchable and on being questioned seriously he would say that he was joking.³ Later as an adult he was to say that untouchability was the most horrendous practice in Hindu religion. Gandhiji dedicated his entire life to remove this blot from the Hinduism that practiced untouchability as a religiously approved act. He had also realised that Indians had over time developed a very unscientific attitude towards sanitation and hygiene. It was this attitude that was responsible to create a class of people who were to handle filth and faeces. This class was then condemned to live outside the main settlement in poverty and destitution and most inhuman physical and mental conditions. When Gandhiji gave a call to improve sanitation and hygiene, he also had firm agenda of integrating the condemned communities with all as equals without bias, prejudice and contempt. For Gandhiji removal of untouchability was also a campaign for *Swachchh* Bharat. The campaign needs to be revived.

Cleaning and cleansing was not limited to body and environs only. For Gandhiji cleansing the soul was ultimate goal for any human being. Building one's character ceaselessly in pursuit of Truth was the goal of life. Cultivating non-violence as force was the way and process to cleanse the soul. Gandhiji had realised that there was a crisis among our population. It was crisis of confidence. We had given up our originality and had become a flattering lot under the British. India had rich culture and had conveyed to the world at large how body and bodily requirements could be curtailed through self-discipline and practice and move towards inner growth. Gandhiji spent his entire life in the act of cleansing self and soul and this he did by applying his self to public and social service. In the Indian spiritual parlance he sought Moksha for his

3. The *Safai kamdar* (hygiene worker) who came to clean the toilet pots in Gandhi family's mansion in Porbandar was one Ukabhai. Child Mohan could not understand why he could not touch Ukabhai. If the contact happened inadvertently, why should he be made to take a bath? What kind of idea of purity it was? The Mother used to say that in case he came in physical contact with an untouchable, he should touch a Muslim and the pollution would go away! Mohan wondered at this logic. For a full account, interested reader may refer, Pyarelal, 1965, *Mahatma Gandhi Volume – 1 The Early Phase*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1986 reprint, page 217



soul (self-attainment) through *Paramartha* - wishing well and working for other souls. In the Introduction to his Autobiography, Gandhiji writes,

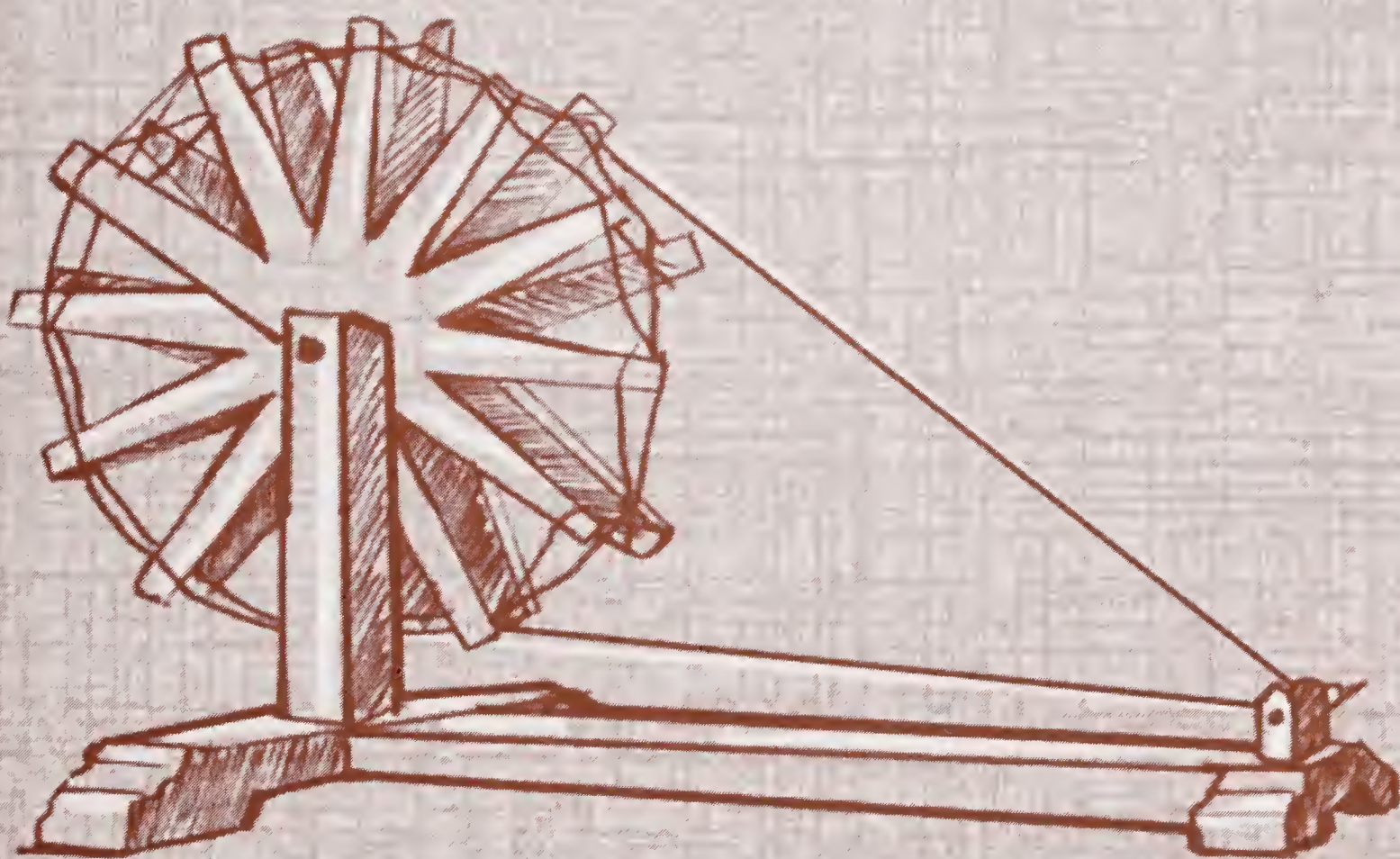
What I want to achieve, - What I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years, - is self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end. But as I have all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all, and my experiments have not been conducted in the closet, but in the open; and not think that this fact detracts from their spiritual value.⁴

In institutionalised Hindu religion *Moksha* is an individual pursuit that has to be followed in private. Gandhiji made this pursuit public. He was seeking his salvation in public and social work for the social betterment and welfare. The path for seeking *Moksha* in public is same as it is when sought in private, i.e., building one's character by self-discipline. And for this a person has to regulate his/her behaviour to the purest level. A person has to be clean; he/she should unceasingly cleanse the soul.

In this manner Gandhiji had visualised to make Bharat a *Swachhh* nation where every citizen was clean and pure physically, socially and spiritually. In this book an attempt is made to bring out in brief Gandhiji's efforts in each of the three aspects: improving sanitation and hygiene, removal of untouchability and cleansing of soul of all those who harboured deep prejudice against the Dalits in the country. The Book has six chapters including the present. The second chapter contains Gandhiji's encounter with sanitation issue in South Africa. This is followed by documenting Gandhiji's experience of insanitation in India that he witnessed in first two years after returning from South Africa in chapter three. In chapter four Gandhiji's efforts to improve sanitation is described along with experiences he and his associates had in sensitising the people in the country. Chapter five describes what Gandhiji had to say about Dalits including traditional sanitation workers in India during his times and glimpses of his work for their amelioration. Chapter six discusses in brief Gandhiji's concept of cleansing of hearts and minds. The chapter ends with some observations.

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4. Gandhi M.K. 1927. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1976 Reprint. p x.



“Everyone must be his own scavenger”



Tryst with Sanitation in South Africa

In this chapter an attempt is made to examine the sanitation and hygiene issue that Gandhiji had encountered in South Africa and how he tackled it. When we invoke Gandhiji in *Swachchh Bharat Abhiyan*, it is relevant to visit the sanitation and hygiene issues among the Indians in South Africa. The problem of sanitation and hygiene was real to an extent, but the context and the degree to which it was raised should be understood. Gandhiji also gained first-hand experience in sanitation when he had set up Phoenix Ashram and Tolstoy Farm. By understanding the sanitation and hygiene issues in South Africa, we would be able to appreciate the intensity with which Gandhiji took up the issue after he returned to India. It is known that Gandhiji later made Village Sanitation as one of the 18 Constructive Programmes.

Indians in South Africa

Indians were transported to South Africa as semi-slaves according to Sir W.W. Hunter, who had studied deeply the condition of Indian labour there.⁵ Gandhiji has noted in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa* that the British officers in India had done the natural thing to extend help to their counterparts in South Africa by sending labourers. They were sent under an agreement.⁶ British officers assured some care of the labourers, who were made to board ships, in regard to their welfare while in transit. However, they had not entered into any understanding about the working

5. Shriman Narayan (General Editor), 1968. *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume Three Satyagraha in South Africa*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. Page 29.

6. The illiterate labourers had changed the pronunciation of 'agreement' into *girmit* and hence the word changed to 'girmitia' as all indentured labourers came to be known.

and living conditions at the destination. The British officers were content with importing labour force and providing them to the land owners, but had hardly bothered to make minimum provisions for their decent living and working conditions. To a large extent the sanitation and hygiene issue originated from this neglect. This aspect is perhaps not adequately highlighted in the studies and analysis on Gandhiji's struggle on behalf of the Indian labourers and the settlers for their human and citizen's rights. It is somewhat surprising that Gandhiji has also not made clear references to this aspect in his account in *Satyagraha in South Africa*, although he has clearly argued that British trading and farming communities had sensed that they could not compete with Indian's economic ways of doing business and frugal ways of living. Hence, they were in general opposed to granting of any fair rights for living and trading by Indians. However, when one examines the issues in depth, it is revealed that the British people in South Africa had raised sanitation and hygiene related issues primarily to deprive Indian community of property ownership rights in freehold areas in towns and cities and trade licenses. In this chapter an attempt is made to examine the sanitation and hygiene issue that Gandhiji encountered in South Africa and the ways in which he tried to tackle it.

Sanitation and Hygiene among Indians in South Africa

Gandhiji, as we know, was born in Modh Bania family where religiosity was given a high rank. Keeping the body clean before performing *Pooja* and visiting temples was a non-negotiable protocol. Mohandas as a young boy and then as an adult had acquired good personal hygiene habits. In fact he had perhaps used soap for the first time on the ship on which he travelled to England as a student. In the Autobiography he has noted that he had used soap taking its use to be a sign of civilisation and had landed in trouble! The sea water bath with the use of soap made his body greasy and he thought that it gave him ringworm! But by the time he left England as a Barrister and then went to South Africa, he was well-versed with the sanitation and hygiene standards of British people. It is not surprising therefore; that a young man of 24 was confident enough to tell the Indian community in South Africa that they needed to improve on their sanitation and hygiene habits. He had addressed the Indian community in Pretoria during June 1893.⁷ He has noted in the Autobiography.

7. C.B. Dalal (Compiler), 1976. *Gandhijini Dinwari (2-10-1869 to 9-1-1915)* (Gujarati). Sabarmati Ashram Preservation and Memorial Trust, Ahmedabad. p 14.

I had found our people's habits to be insanitary, as compared with those of Englishmen around them, and drew their attention to it.⁸

Origin of the Problem

Later during his stay in South Africa, when Gandhiji came into contact with indentured labourers, he realised that the labourers were indeed very poor to attend to the hygiene and sanitation requirements in their settlements. Perhaps their inability to improve the environs also led them to neglect and ignore personal hygiene. The relevant point however, is that British and other European people⁹ used the government's dishonesty in the matter of allotment of habitation locations to Indian communities to the advantage of the former. They petitioned to the government that Indians lived in insanitary conditions, did not want to improve and hence they could not be given ownership rights in the freehold areas of the town. It should be understood that once the indentured labour entered South Africa in large number, the Indian traders who had migrated and settled in Mauritius saw scope to open trading centres in South Africa as well. As a result, free Indian traders and service providers also migrated to this new destination. These traders had no problems to trade with Zulus and other indigenous communities and the economic exchange was mutually beneficial. The Indian traders prospered in no time. This alarmed the British who had experienced huge gains in clearing and cultivating lands with the help of indentured Indian labourers. The English and other European residents represented to the Colonial government and pleaded to ban and or restrict the entry of free Indian settlers. They also wanted to restrict the ownership rights of the indentured labourers who became free after the agreement period was over and had decided to stay back as free settlers. Most English and other European people who had settled were apparently greedy and did not want to allow others to work freely and prosper. Gandhiji had noted,

The Europeans in this newly opened up country had a boundless hunger for the riches. They were almost strangers to the dictates of morality. Here are some statements they made in their petitions: 'These Indians have no sense of human decency. They suffer from loathsome

8. Gandhi M.K. 1927. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1976 Reprint. p 93.

9. English were last European community to arrive in South Africa. Portuguese were first and then were followed by Dutch, French and German. A mix of them came to be known as Boers.



diseases. They consider every woman as their prey. They believe that women have no souls.’ These four sentences contain four lies.¹⁰

The governments did not believe in what all was said in the complaint by the Europeans. Her Majesty’s Government in England and the colonial governments had made provisions for free settlers, but the attitude of the administrators who implemented the laws and the provisions made in the Acts in South Africa carried serious prejudices towards the Indian and Asian communities. Their dishonesty in interpreting the laws that were passed reflected in the arrangements they made for the Indians to live. Gandhiji had further noted,

In all towns inhabited by Indians, these locations were selected in dirty places, situated far away from the towns, where there was no water supply, no lighting arrangements and no sanitary convenience to speak of. Thus the Indians became the Panchamas of the Transvaal.¹¹

Panchamas refers to a word used during those days in India for the untouchable castes belonging to lowest rungs of caste hierarchy and converted into other religions to overcome the stigma. Gandhiji and the Indians living in South Africa during those years experienced and realised that the Europeans in the Transvaal believed that physical contact with the Indians or living near them would defile them. It was no surprise that Gandhiji wanted to end the hostile practice of untouchability in India with such firmness that he displayed later on in India.

Gandhiji Settles in South Africa

Gandhiji had not become a political activist in South Africa yet, although he had gone through a very painful personal experience of rejection due to colour prejudice first at the Pietermaritzburg railway station and later in the coach while travelling from Durban to Pretoria. He made a unique resolve while reflecting on the event in the waiting room of Pietermaritzburg station on that cold night that he would not seek any redress for personal insults. The issue was that of a prejudice towards a community and if at all justice and redress had to be sought it was to be sought at the community level. He lived in Pretoria for some time and started studying the situation. By the time he had helped resolve the financial dispute between two prominent and rich businessmen by arbitration, he had gained fair insights into the problems that were there in South Africa vis-à-vis Indian community and coloured people.

10. Shriman Narayan (General Editor), op cit. p 44

11. *Ibid* p 47

Gandhiji had not made any pro-active attempt to confront the issue and he would not have taken up the cause of Indians but for a fortuitous happening at the farewell party that was arranged for him by Dada Abdulla.¹² Gandhiji had helped the settlement of the dispute by convincingly suggesting arbitration to both the parties. Having accomplished his work Gandhiji desired to go back to India. On the day of farewell party when everyone was busy he sat down to read an old newspaper and an advertisement caught his attention. The Government in Transvaal had brought a Bill to exclude Indians from the franchise. Gandhiji drew the attention of the cream of the Indian community that had gathered in the send-off party over this matter. People in the gathering understood the import of this exclusion, but felt helpless to do anything. Gandhiji suggested that a strong representation should be sent to the Government and people should be prepared for a long fight. Indian community requested Gandhiji to stay back for some more time and help. Thus began Gandhiji's stay in South Africa. Petitions were drafted and dispatched, deputation met the government and the parliament heads, but the Bill was passed. A petition was then drafted for Lord Ripon.¹³ Gandhiji had agreed to stay back only for a few months until this particular issue had reached a point. Once the petition to Lord Ripon (the one drafted in July 1994) was sent, Gandhiji once again prepared to go back to India. By then the leaders of the Indian community had understood that without young Gandhiji's leadership they would not be able to take the struggle for their rights forward. Arrangements were made and Gandhiji stayed on.

It was soon realised that a formal organisation will have to take shape to mobilise people and organise the struggle methodically. Natal Indian Congress was founded on August 22, 1894. Seven objectives were set.¹⁴ Important among them were: educating the Indian youth born in South Africa, to ascertain grievances of Indian labourers and seeking redress using constitutional means, and enquire into the condition of the indentured Indians and help them out of special hardships. Pyarelal has

12. Dada Abdulla was the businessman who had hired Gandhiji's services in a dispute settlement case with another businessman.

13. Lord Ripon was the Colony Secretary to Her Majesty's Government in England. It may be remembered that when first such petition was drafted Gandhi was only 25. Those interested in reading various petitions for their legal fineness and flavour of English language then may refer to the **Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)** Volume 1, 1969 edition. p 147 and p 204.

14. Pyarelal, 1965, *Mahatma Gandhi Volume – 1 The Early Phase*. p 435-6. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1986 reprint.



noted that simultaneously the Congress worked for the reforms from within. He writes,

Indians were charged with being dirty and tight-fisted. Their houses were mere shanties. They slept where they traded... Feeling that nobody should be able to point the finger of scorn at them, Gandhiji had lectures delivered, debates held and suggestions made at the Congress meetings on such subjects as personal hygiene, individual and corporate cleanliness and the advisability of having living apartments separate from trade premises... No smoking was allowed at any committee meeting.¹⁵

An 'Open Letter'

Colour prejudice was at the core of British mind-set in rejecting the Indian community as co-settlers in South Africa. Threat of competition was also an important factor. Indians were not supposed to move freely after nine in the night. Pass and permission were required to move around.¹⁶ Those who were caught were severely ill-treated. The civic life of Indians in South Africa was traumatic. Gandhiji after deciding to stay back for longer period started practicing as a barrister. He took up the cases of injustice, insult and atrocities on Indian by the English and Europeans including the police and the government servants. Soon he realised that getting redress in the courts was not enough. The offenders, including the police, carried grudge. He realised that cultivating opinion and building goodwill were ways of winning hearts in the long run. Pyarelal notes that it was this train of reasoning that led Gandhiji, as the Secretary of Natal Indian Congress, to issue an 'Open Letter' to the members of the Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly of Natal. The letter which acquired fame contained in it a substantial discussion on the Indian's way of living in the context of sanitation and hygiene.¹⁷ In the letter he raised four specific questions. Under the first question 'Are the Indians desirable as citizens in the Colony?' he discussed the issue of cleanliness and hygiene of the Indian people.¹⁸ He categorically

15. *Ibid* p 439

16. One may recall here the personal experience of Gandhiji one night when he set out to a stroll as usual and was walking on the footpath next to the Governor's official Bungalow and a European watchman on duty had pushed him hard. Gandhiji fell down. The watchman did so because in Gandhiji, he saw a coloured person who was walking in the night which he was not supposed to do. Refer, M.K. Gandhi *Autobiography* op cit. pp 95-96.

17. The full text of the letter can be read in CWMG, Volume 1, 1969. pp 170 - 188

18. *Ibid* p174-75

mentioned that the common objection to Indian traders and labourers was their insanitary habits. He wrote, “I am afraid I must, to my great mortification, admit this charge partially”. The partial admission was with a qualification. Indians were not maintaining desired standards implying that they did not maintain such standards that was expected of them and also of which they were capable. The civic and state administration lacked the will to be strict, just, and merciful in operating the sanitary law which would cope and eventually eradicate the ill among all. He did not think that the evil was so great either. It was true that indentured labourers were too poor to attend to good sanitation practices and to an extent personal hygiene. But the others – the free settlers, had a cultural and religious tradition to be clean and hygienic. Since most population in the trading communities were Muslims, without naming the religion he wrote that they had strict religious tradition to at least have a bath every week, and compulsorily perform ablutions by washing their faces, hands up to the elbows and their feet, every time they offered prayers.

The ‘Open Letter’ brought admiration, appreciation and criticism. The admiration and appreciation was for the frankness, calmness and moderation with which Gandhiji wrote. The *Natal Mercury* wrote that Gandhiji was as impartial as anyone could expect him to be, and probably a little more so than might have been expected considering that he did not receive very just treatment at the hands of Law and Society when he first came to the Colony.¹⁹ The *Critic* of Johannesburg in an article titled ‘The Light of Asia’, conceded the point that India indeed was the cradle of civilisation as stated by Gandhi in the letter, but pointed out that most Hindu labourers who came to work belonged to the lowest caste in the caste hierarchy. How could they invite respect for the ways they lived as condemned people even within their own society? It is perhaps because of this realisation Gandhiji had in his letter partially admitted the charge of insanitary habits of the community with great mortification. Gandhiji’s insistence on upliftment of the untouchables later in India might have also derived force from this type of comments on his Open Letter.

Sanitation in Gandhiji’s Petitions

The first petition to Lord Ripon made on July 14, 1894 did not have any mention about the sanitation issue. It was only in the second petition that was sent in May 1895 that sanitation and hygiene surfaced. One can now see the reason. By July 1894, Gandhiji had just acted on

19. Pyarelal, *op.cit.* p 474



the basis of the text of the Bill that focussed on the issue of exclusion of Indians from franchise. After the initial responses were sent by the Indian community to the Legislative Assembly and Council, and to Lord Ripon, Secretary of Colony in Her Majesty's Government, Gandhiji stayed back and Natal Indian Congress was founded. His work for the Congress and the community at large exposed him to the problems on the ground. He also sensed the thinking and mind of the English and Europeans towards Indian community. As described in the preceding paragraphs, Gandhiji discussed sanitation and hygiene in the 'Open Letter' too. Hence, in the second petition to Lord Ripon, Gandhiji discussed sanitation and hygiene issue.

Gandhiji drafted the second petition to Lord Ripon on behalf of Indian community in South Africa in which the position of Indians was defended and prayer was made for granting legitimate trade and settlement rights on par with other free settlers. He defended the sanitary practices of Indian traders. The sanitation issue was brought in thus:

The unfortunate departure from the 14th Clause of the Convention of 1881, which protects *equally* the interests of *all* persons *other* than *Natives*, has originated and been countenanced in and by the assumption that the Indian settlers in the Transvaal do not observe proper sanitation and is based on the misrepresentations of certain interested persons. It has been emphatically laid down by Her Majesty's Government throughout the correspondence about the Law 3 of 1885 that separate streets might be set apart for the Indians in the interests of public health, but that they cannot be compelled to trade in certain fixed parts only of the towns.²⁰

Evidence Collection

Gandhiji knew as a barrister that the Indian Case in the Petition would become stronger with evidences. Hence, he arranged a visit of an English doctor who perhaps was a private practitioner in Transvaal. In the Petition the report by the doctor was attached as Appendix A. The letter contains signature by Dr. Veale, B.A., M.B.B.S. (Cantab.). The letter *inter alia* contained the following paragraph which described the condition of the Indian community and their settlement.

I have generally found them cleanly in their person, and free from the personal diseases due to dirt or careless habits. Their dwellings are generally clean and sanitation is willingly attended to by them.

20. CWMG, Volume 1 p 204.

Class considered, I should be of opinion that the lowest class Indian compares most favourably with the lowest class White, i.e., the lowest class Indian lives better and in better habitation, and with more regard to sanitary measures, than the lowest class White.²¹

The second petition to Lord Ripon was made in May 1895. It was about two years that young Gandhiji had spent in South Africa. He made friends among English and other Europeans too. It must also be noted that not all English people who lived in South Africa were against Indians and other coloured people. There were gentlemen and ladies who wanted the government to treat all citizens equal. They also knew that some of their fellow Englishmen and other Europeans in Transvaal were malicious towards the Indian community. In fact, such malicious groups of Europeans had started an agitation demanding from the government to disallow settlement of any free Indians and the indentured labourers who had completed the terms under agreement and had become free. In this context a section of Europeans including English wrote a letter to the state head of Pretoria.

We firmly believe that the agitation owes its origin not to their (*read Indians*) habits as regards sanitation, but to trade jealousy, because, owing to their frugal and temperate habits, they have been able to keep down the prices of necessities of life and have therefore been an inestimable boon to the poor classes of the society in the State.

Gandhiji attached this letter also as an Appendix to the petition to Lord Ripon. The Petition did not bear any positive results. Hence the struggle continued. And sanitation issue kept coming up during most part of Gandhiji's stay in South Africa. A brief account follows.²²

Gandhiji's Continued Efforts

Gandhiji's first long stay in South Africa was for three years. In 1896, he had visited India with an idea to stay for six months and sensitise Indian elite and the British ruling class in India about the South Africa problem. He had prepared a pamphlet on the situation in South Africa. It came to be known as the Green Pamphlet.²³ In presenting analytical picture of the grievances of Indians in South Africa, Gandhiji had noted in the Pamphlet the charge made then by the English and Europeans that Indians had insanitary habits. He then countered it by saying that Indians

21. *Ibid* p 215

22. *Ibid* p 217

23. It had carried a green cover on it.



lived as good as possible.²⁴ In the Pamphlet he also referred to Dr. Veale's report. Gandhiji also mentioned Dr. Veale's opinion in the first Public Meeting he had addressed in Bombay (now Mumbai) on September 26, 1896 under the chairmanship of Sir Pherozeshah Mehta. The context was that a section of English and the European people in South Africa believed that Indians as a community were of immoral disposition and filthy habits. He had also made a point in Madras (now Chennai) on October 26, 1896 that contrary to the charge of being insanitary and filthy, Indian community was given responsibility in industries to look after sanitation!

Gandhi returned to South Africa in December 1896. In March 1897 the Indians living in Natal made a representation and sent a Memorial to the then Principal Secretary of State for Colonies Joseph Chamberlain. In the Memorial the point about the allegation by the English and Europeans about low morals and filthy habits was reiterated. And reference to certificates by Dr. Veale and others were also made. It appears that the allegation of insanitary habits among Indian community was brought up every time a situation to grant the rights arose. In May 1897, once again a Memorial was sent to Joseph Chamberlain. The Memorialists argued that to invoke the insanitation issue was unfair and they once again, produced certificates by Dr. Veale of Pretoria, Dr. Spink, Dr. Nahmmacher and thirty European firms of Johannesburg had absolved the Indian community of any serious insanitary practices.²⁵ The Indian community under Gandhiji's leadership continued to resist colonial administration's moves to relocate them on sanitation grounds.

The sanitation issue did not die. Gandhiji argued that it was the colour prejudice at the base that made the White react in the way they did and time and again brought up the imagined insanitary habits among Indians. Certificates from reputed doctors and public health personnel also did not fully satisfy the White administrators. When the Mayor of Durban tried to introduce the Natal legislation against Indian traders on the lines of the Transvaal Locations Law, Gandhi condemned the move as "a premature effort to introduce into Natal the repugnant old laws temporarily revived in the Transvaal" in the *Indian Opinion*.²⁶ A deputation of the Indian traders met the Mayor and made representation. In the issue of *Indian Opinion* July 16, 1903. Gandhiji wrote about Sir Peter Faure's opinion expressed before the Mayors of

24. Discussion is based on matter in CWMG Volume 2, October 1976 edition.

25. CWMG Volume 3, June 1979.

26. *Ibid* p 384

different municipalities from Cape that there was no need to segregate the locations for Indian communities on the grounds of sanitation.²⁷ Dr. Johnston, an expert in sanitary matters had deposed before the Insanitary Area Commission at Johannesburg and stated that he had found nothing against Indian habitants in Johannesburg so far as sanitation was concerned. Hence, expecting a positive response from the South African Government, Gandhi wrote in the same issue the following.

In view, however, of Sir Pieter Faure's reply to the Mayoral Deputation, we are hoping that we have heard the last of the Bazaar proposal so far as the Cape is concerned. We, however, deem it advisable to warn our countrymen at the Cape to be very careful and to see that no cause is given for complaint in the way of overcrowding or insanitation. Seeing that every act of the British Indian is being most closely watched, it is his first duty to avoid giving a handle for any opposition.²⁸

1904 was a remarkable year for Gandhiji in South Africa with regard to public health and sanitation. The year 1903 ended with a letter from the Chairman of the British Indian Association Abdool Gani to the Associated Chambers of Commerce at Pretoria, and published in *Indian Opinion* issue of December 24, 1903.²⁹ A copy of the letter was also sent to Dadabhai Naoroji and to the Secretary of State for India. It was regarding the proposed amendment of the Asiatic Bazar Notice No. 356 of 1903. In this letter Indian community had agreed to accept the challenge, if made, with respect to location and sanitation. The letter said that an Indian had never been given an opportunity, his position had always been uncertain, and he had constantly remained in that uncertainty with respect to settlement and its public health amenities. On behalf of the community, the Chairman had ventured to assure that the Indians were readily amenable to any regulation that might be framed with reference to sanitation, or the separation of dwelling from business places. But fate had something more sinister in store in the year to follow in the neighbouring city Johannesburg. Gandhiji personally was engaged throughout, right from warning the civic authorities to providing committed and untiring humanitarian services to nurse the fatally sick people.

27. *Ibid* pp 444-5

28. *Ibid* p 446

29. CWMG, Volume 4, August 1960. p 86



Black Plague

In February 1904, Gandhiji invited Dr. C. Porter, Medical Officer of Health, Johannesburg to visit a location. In a letter dated February 11, he wrote that the Indian location was in a shocking state. The reason was overcrowding, which was also caused by allowing the native population, known in those days as *kaffir*, to settle alongside Indians. Gandhiji had pointed out that the overcrowding would lead to high degree of insanitary conditions in the locality. Gandhiji argued that the decision to allow the natives to stay in the same location was deliberate. He protested. But to the medical officer, his appeal was to visit the location and assess for himself the situation and the potential danger of an epidemic. Gandhiji wrote,

I venture to write to you regarding the shocking state of the Indian Location. The rooms appear to be overcrowded beyond description. The sanitary service is very irregular, and many of the residents of the Location have been to my office to complain that the sanitary conditions are far worse than before... From what I hear, I believe the mortality in the Location has increased considerably and it seems to me that, if the present state of things is continued, the outbreak of some epidemic disease is merely a question of time. I know you are very great on sanitary reform. May I, therefore, ask you to be good enough to pay a personal visit and deal effectively as well with the overcrowding as with the sanitation. If I can be of any service, I shall be pleased to accompany you, should you approve of my suggestion.³⁰

Dr. Porter's visit did materialise. It is clear from a follow up letter written on February 15, 1904 and published in *Indian Opinion* in April 9, 1904 issue. In this letter Gandhiji thanked Dr. Porter for the visit, but stated that the Town Council's stand of helplessness was not acceptable. He then discussed how the sanitation management could be done on the location and how things could very well improve. He attempted the suggestion as Dr. Porter had advised Gandhiji to do so. The content in the letter is valuable for any municipal administration even today with regard to solid waste management and public health measures. Gandhiji emphasised that the civic system had to respond. Passing on sanitation responsibility to the dwellers would not have solved the problem at all. Gandhiji wrote then that 'everybody's responsibility was nobody's responsibility'. Then he had warned,

30. *Ibid* p 129

I feel convinced that every minute wasted over the matter merely hastens a calamity for Johannesburg and that through absolutely no fault of the British Indians... I feel that a few hundred pounds now spent will probably cause a saving of thousands of pounds; for, if, unfortunately, an epidemic breaks out in the Location, panic will ensue and money will then be spent like water in order to cure an evil which is now absolutely preventable.³¹

The Town Council did not pay heed to the warnings issued by Gandhiji. Plague broke out. Fortunately, for the Indian community the Indian Location was not responsible but one of gold mines near Johannesburg, where Negro community worked and lived, was the origin. The failure was on the part of the municipal authority as the Location was set up by it and therefore sanitation management was their direct responsibility. Nevertheless, the insanitary conditions in the overcrowded Indian Location had its worse impact and the numbers of Indians who were infected and who died were highest. In the Autobiography Gandhiji has devoted three chapters and titled it as Black Plague. Some excerpts provide insights into the situation then and Gandhiji's role in it:

The criminal negligence of the Municipality and the ignorance of the Indian settlers thus conspired to render the location thoroughly insanitary...Indians were not removed from the location as soon as the Municipality secured its ownership...having ceased to be proprietors they became tenants... The number of tenants increased, and with them the squalor and disorder. While the Indians were fretting over this state of things, there was a sudden outbreak of the black plague also called pneumonic plague, more fatal than bubonic.³²

Gandhiji and his team devoted full time in preventive and nursing care. The Town Clerk expressed his gratitude for the quick decision Gandhiji took to shift the patients into a vacant house. He and his team of volunteers saved number of lives and contained the epidemic as much as possible by putting their lives into grave risk. In April 9, 1904 issue of *Indian Opinion* Gandhiji published a letter he wrote to Johannesburg Press in which he had categorically stated that the Town Council had been sufficiently warned in advance about the possible outbreak of plague epidemic. The Town Council had handled the sanitation of the location badly. He admitted that poor Indians had not been able to observe good sanitation. He wrote that the poor were not the keepers of public health.

31. *Ibid* p 130

32. *Op cit.* p 216-7



It was Public Health Committee that had failed to enforce the law and unfortunately had flagrantly broken it !³³

Aftermath of Plague

After having realised that the White authorities were using sanitation and hygiene as a weapon to wield and restrict the rights of living and working of the Indians, Gandhiji, true to his characteristic spirit, continued to expose the deliberate neglect of the authorities in the matter. However, he was also always very keen that Indians as individuals and as a community became sensitive and made serious attempts to improve in personal hygiene and public sanitation. The plague outbreak went past taking its toll of 47 Indians out of 56 of all deaths, but Gandhiji wanted the community to learn the lesson. In the *Indian Opinion* of April 30, 1904, he noted that the Indians were treated badly after the Plague outbreak. They were refused easy entries in public places. They were quarantined for days before allowing entry in the city. It was demeaning for the Indians, but he wrote that the Indians must learn a lesson. The Indians in South Africa had, rightly or wrongly, got the evil reputation of being insanitary and ignorant of the first principles of hygiene. The harsh regulations were also result of the prejudiced opinion. However, he advised the Indians to take this bitter pill and learn for life. He wrote,

Such regulations, harsh as they undoubtedly are, ought not to make us angry. But we should so order our conduct as to prevent a repetition of them. And with that end in view, we should set about putting our houses in order as well literally as figuratively. The meanest of us should know the value of sanitation and hygiene. Overcrowding should be stamped out from our midst... Is not cleanliness its own reward? Would it not be an inestimable boon to ward off another attack of the plague?... By and by, when we have asserted our position as a people regarding sanitation and hygiene as part of our being, and not merely of lip profession, the prejudice, in so far as it is based on that charge, will go. And we shall gain for ourselves a name for the practice of the laws of health which would always stand us in good stead. This is the lesson we would have our countrymen learn from the recent trial they have undergone.³⁴

33. The letter to the Johannesburg Press ends with a beautiful sentence. 'A trinity of interests (viz., of truth, public wealth, and my countrymen) is my excuse for trespassing upon your courtesy'. CWMG Volume 4 *op. cit.* p 160.

34. *Ibid* p 175

The issues of *Indian Opinion* in 1904 and 1905 contain discussion on plague, sanitation, licenses to Indian trades, locations, medical reports on Indian locations and their critique. It is important to note that Gandhiji was seized with the problem of sanitation and hygiene among the Indian communities and did not leave an opportunity to instruct the community members to be very sensitive on the issue and respond. However, his major political point was that the civic administrators and the governments in South Africa states were negligent on the matter. The property rights on the workplace and the living place were also highly conditional so as to dissuade the settlers from exercising proprietary rights. In the absence of clear proprietary and property rights, the settlers were not inclined to follow the prevailing laws of sanitation. A vicious circle had been formed.

The main objective of Gandhiji was to win for Indian communities such locations in the towns and cities in South Africa that would be amenable to good sanitation and hygiene. He knew that poor Indians did not observe healthy hygiene and sanitation practices and the trading communities were good in such practices, but were not given good locations for settlements. Gandhiji strategically worked with the Indian community for improvement of sanitation practices at one level. He was very sincere in this. Then he took up the matter with the civic authorities and went on insisting for improving the physical infrastructure and its maintenance. He then addressed the state governments and the office of Secretaries of the Colonies in Africa and India to raise the issue of neglect on part of the civic authorities. To the high level authorities he also presented better credentials of the Indian communities as certified by the English and European medical and public health officials.

In April 1905, there was a major Plague breakout in India. Gandhiji discussed it in great detail in the issue of *Indian Opinion* of June 3, 1905. In this issue Gandhiji made a remarkable observation. Some seemingly patriotic journalist of a newspaper argued that British governance was responsible to reduce Indians into abject poverty and it is the poverty that made the poor people more vulnerable to Plague. Gandhiji argued that while there was some truth in the point, but it was basically sanitation and hygiene that reduced the vulnerability as Plague attacked even the healthy persons. The living quarters and the neighbourhood environs and particularly the latrines were to be kept clean. Once a locality was affected by Plague, people had to move out of the locality and go to clean and sanitised places.



Further, in June 17, 1905 issue of *Indian Opinion* he discussed the inoculation issue. Quoting Dr. Turner from Bombay (now Mumbai) he noted that people in Bombay Presidency were reluctant to get inoculated. Dr. Turner and others had suggested various ways in which people could be incentivised or coerced into getting inoculated. Gandhiji did not agree with the idea and had argued that it was necessary to bring about an improvement in sanitary habits, morality and economic conditions of the people. He wrote that he believed that Indians committed sin by not observing rules of sanitation.

The plague epidemic had seemingly haunted the towns of South Africa repeatedly. In the issue of *Indian Opinion* of October 14, 1905,³⁵ there appeared an item titled 'The Bubonic Plague'. It contained educative material meant largely for Indians residing in South Africa then. The article noted that the plague had come to stay and it appeared year in and year out as a warning against darkness, filth and overcrowding. The educative part was that it contained clear instructions such as: all the surroundings of dwelling-houses and business premises should be kept perfectly clean; people should get as much light, sun and air as possible; and all suspected cases should be promptly reported to the authorities. He also had a clear advice which stated that 'every educated Indian had a unique privilege: he could become a missionary in hygiene and sanitation'.

The civic issues continued to bother him and until he stayed in South Africa; he tried relentlessly to orient, educate and train Indians in sanitation and hygiene. In 2012 smallpox broke out in Indian settlements. Some Indians tried to hide the cases. Gandhiji was interviewed by the *Evening Chronicle* of Johannesburg on various issues bothering Indians including the smallpox. The correspondent wanted to know whether the Europeans needed some special protection from Indians as the community had cases of smallpox and that it was being concealed. The correspondent was perhaps trying to justify the civic authority's idea to segregate the Indian community's location from the Whites and others. To this Gandhiji admitted that there indeed were some black sheep in the community, but by and large people in the Indian community were cooperative to the authorities in declaring the incidence and following the expert advice. Gandhiji argued that if the people had not been cooperative and if they had not helped the public health authorities, the authorities could not have unearthed the smallpox cases. He said that protection to

35. CWMG Volume 5, June 1961 p 100-1

other communities would not come from segregating Indians from others. This was the main political point. Gandhiji said,

You will perhaps recollect that, when evidence was being laid before the Insanitary Area Expropriation Commission, medical testimony was given to the effect that any neglect of sanitation that existed among British Indians, or the others, was not to be successfully dealt with by segregating them to inaccessible Bazaars, or to places which would not lend themselves to effective supervision of the public control. The proper method of dealing with the trouble was to effectively enforce sanitation by-laws, and if the by-laws were insufficient, to make them wide enough to cover all kinds of cases.³⁶

***Satyagraha* in South Africa**

Gandhiji stayed in South Africa until the end of 1914. More serious issues relating to settlement and citizenship came up against which the famous *Satyagraha* was born. Sanitation continued to be an issue, but not a prominent one. The ordinance published in the Government Gazette Extraordinary of Transvaal of August 22, 1906 was a Black Act where primary citizen's rights of Indians were taken back and every Indian was to be reduced to a compulsorily registered immigrant and nothing more. Gandhiji thought that it was the result of unadulterated hatred of English towards Indians. He intensely felt that for Indians do or die situation had arrived. The struggle went on and took serious turns. It is history now of Indian people in South Africa as to how they attained status of dignified citizens under Gandhiji's leadership by putting up a non-violent resistance and protest movement called *Satyagraha*.

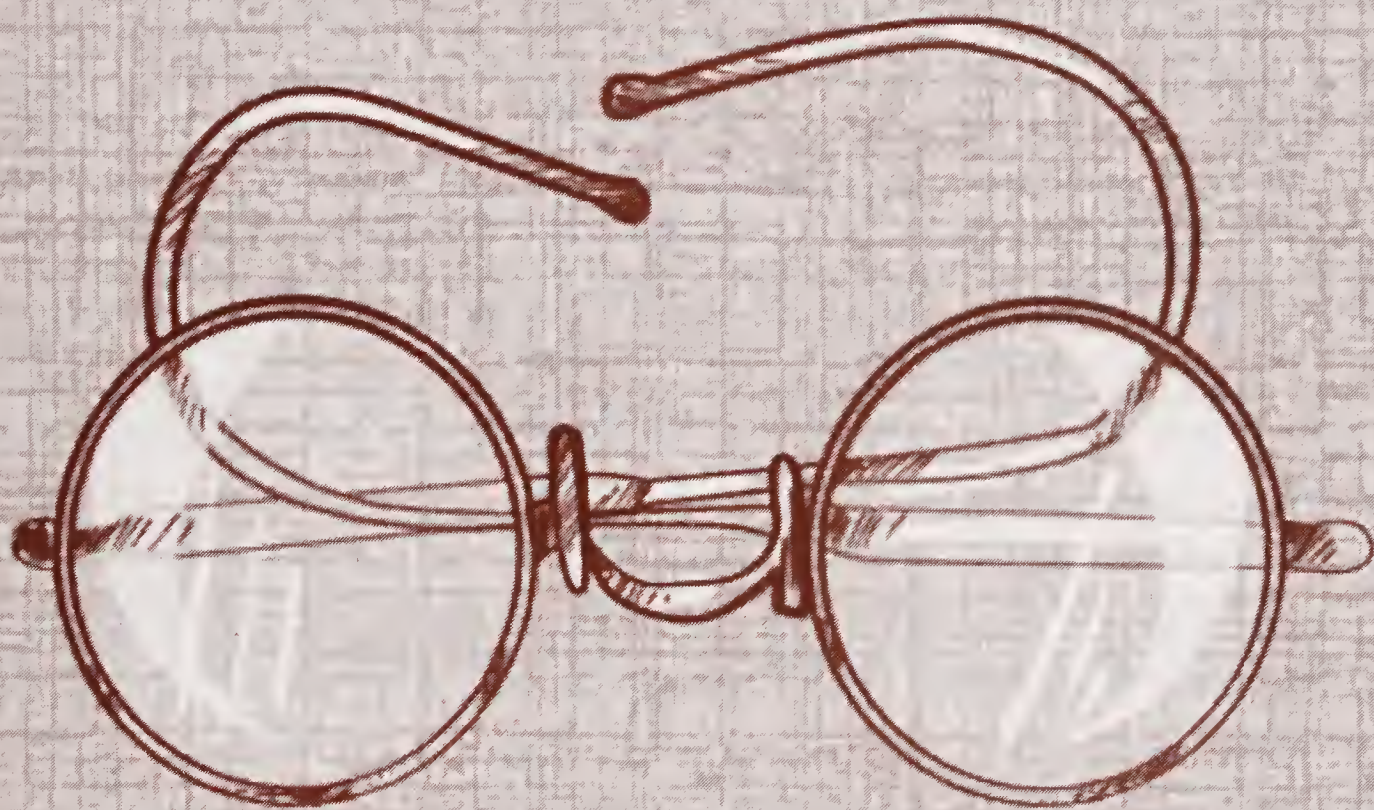
To conclude, the young Barrister Gandhi who landed in South Africa, who had the first hand taste of colour prejudice, observed that the Indian community had serious lacuna with respect to sanitation and hygiene in their settlements. It had become the front for the British authorities in civic administration and the colonial governments to deny the basic living, working, property and proprietary rights to Indians. Since the Indian community had problems in observing desirable standards of sanitation and hygiene he had to 'with great mortification admit the charge partially'. This was an intelligent public admission. It allowed him to work within the community for continuous improvement in the status of personal cleanliness and hygiene. He could also build a strong case against the civic authorities and the governments in their intentional failure in

36. CWMG, Volume 11, March 1964 p 211.



providing decent locations and necessary public health infrastructure to the Indian community at large and without which ‘everybody’s business had become nobody’s business’. In the final analysis, he able to convince the colonial authorities and win rights for dignified and decent living. In case of an outbreak of an epidemic Gandhiji did not confine to blame game, but plunged into activities of nursing the sick and cleaning and sanitising the areas. Gandhiji returned to India in 1915 and continued to make sanitation and hygiene a mission for the country.

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“In the matter of outward sanitation
we have to learn a great deal
from the West”.



Initial Experiences in India

Gandhiji and Kasturba landed in Bombay (now Mumbai) on January 9, 1915. His first recorded encounter with sanitation issue was when he boarded train for Rajkot from Bombay on the night of January 14. He was travelling third class, and dressed like a common man. Plague had broken out in *Kathiawar*.³⁷ Third class passengers were medically examined. Gandhiji had a slight fever. The inspector instructed Gandhiji to report to the medical officer at Rajkot. People who knew Gandhiji tried to object, but Gandhiji appreciated the performance of duty and did not mind the advice. He visited the medical officer at Rajkot on January 17, 1915, the day he alighted.

In months to follow, Gandhiji was to witness and experience insanitation, lack of cleanliness, unhygienic environment, dirt and filth throughout the country. In a span of first four months he travelled length and breadth of India. He resolved that he would travel third class in railways and as a deck passenger in ships. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, his political Guru, had advised him that for one year after landing in India, he should not speak in public on any issue, but travel throughout the country keeping his eyes and ears open and learn what the country was. Gandhiji almost followed the advice in letter and spirit and embarked on the tour of India. The resolve to travel with common people exposed him to the ground reality. This was not new to him, as in South Africa ‘Gandhi Bhai’ - as he came to be known for all the poor indentured labourers and others - had witnessed the hardships of the poor subjects of the British Raj. Soon Gandhiji was to make sanitation-hygiene and amelioration

37. An area in Gujarat that comprised a number of princely states. It was later amalgamated into other areas under British suzerainty and after Independence formed into Saurashtra state. In 1960 when Gujarat state was formed it was merged with it.

of scavengers and other untouchables from their pathetic condition one of the major missions of his life. Simultaneously, he had also sincerely attempted integration of ‘untouchables’³⁸ with ‘upper’ caste people. In this chapter an attempt is made to bring out Gandhiji’s experience and impressions with regard to sanitation and hygiene status in the country between 1915 and 1917. His actions and ideas for improvement have been described in brief.

Shantiniketan

When Gandhiji and Kasturba arrived in India, the Phoenix Ashram inmates were camping in Shantiniketan after having spent some days in Gurukul Kangdi near Hardwar in Mahatma Munshiram’s abode.³⁹ In Shantiniketan, the Phoenix team was given separate premise to live and the in-charge of Phoenix Ashram, Maganlal Gandhi,⁴⁰ was in command. Phoenix Ashram observances were being followed. The teachers, students and workers of Shantiniketan were observing them with pleasant curiosity. Gandhiji reached there during second half of February 1915. He saw and appreciated the way in which Phoenix Ashram family was living. Kakasaheb Kalelkar, who became one of the close associates of Gandhiji in Sabarmati Ashram, noted that at Shantiniketan Gandhiji dispensed with servants arranged for him, cleaned his room, made his bed and washed his dishes and clothes.⁴¹ Gandhiji and the Phoenix team nearly revolutionised Shantiniketan. The lesson of *Svavalamban* – self-reliance - was being taught to the teachers and students.

Shantiniketan was an institution that housed the ‘*bhadralok*’ of the times. It has been noted that the cooks were *Brahmins* and would not allow anybody in the kitchen lest it got polluted! But the hygiene and

38. Known by various caste names were all those with whom caste Hindus had practiced untouchability. Throughout we have used the word untouchability of Dalit or Harijan in the text. Only where the original texts are quoted they carry the word used originally.

39. Munshiramji after taking *sanyas* was known as Swami Shraddhanand. His Ashram known as Gurukul at Kangdi later got recognition as a deemed university by the University Grants Commission, Government of India.

40. Maganlal Gandhi was Gandhiji’s nephew, son of his cousin Khushalchand Gandhi. Gandhiji had taken Maganlal Gandhi to South Africa in 1902 just after the boy had appeared for Matriculation examination for second time. Later, when Phoenix Ashram was set up, Maganlal assumed a key role in running it. After returning to India in 1915, Maganlal Gandhi remained with Gandhiji and became an irreplaceable manager of Sabarmati Ashram until his death.

41. Mentioned in Nayar Sushila, 1994. *Mahatma Gandhi Volume 4: India Awakened*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 2010 Reprint p 49.

sanitation standards were perhaps relatively poor as assessed by Gandhiji and his Ashram inmates. The Gandhi diary of March 9, 1915 Tuesday, notes ‘Went round with Sanitary Committee. No end of filth’.⁴²

Acharya Kripalani, then visiting to meet Gandhi at Shantiniketan, later notes in autobiography that Gandhiji,

attempted to reform the poet’s establishment, not being much impressed by the quality of food that was served in the ashram, as also the general hygiene at Shantiniketan.⁴³

For next few months all work related to running the place was taken up by the inmates. Rabindranath Tagore was pleased to see the change and to an extent amused. Besides cooking and keeping the kitchen clean, the work also involved toilet and campus cleaning. The key characteristics of Gandhiji and his close associates as Ashram dwellers were amply demonstrated from the beginning. Gandhiji’s action was followed by his lesson. The enthusiasm among the Shantiniketan inmates lasted until the approaching vacation and after that ‘normalcy’ was restored! However, it should be noted that in Shantiniketan ever since 1915, every year March 10 is observed as *Svavalamban Divas*.

As a Deck Passenger

Gandhiji did not have to wait long to experience and witness insanitary conditions and very poor sense of hygiene among people. On March 14, 1915, while travelling to Rangoon in an overcrowded deck, he observes, ‘No end to filth and over-crowding [on the boat]’.⁴⁴ Gandhiji called it ‘two days of severe trial’.

What was an apology for a bath room was unbearably dirty, the latrines were stinking sinks. To use the latrine one had to wade through urine and excreta or jump over them... If anything was lacking to complete the picture of stink and filth, the passengers furnished it by their thoughtless habits. They spat where they sat, dirtied the surroundings...⁴⁵

Gandhiji had developed an interesting trait which is perhaps worth reflecting and emulating by all those of us who would like to pass as conscientised citizens. While encountered with disorder, injustice and unfairness, Gandhi would first report it to the person in-charge. In the

42. CWMG Volume 13 November 1964. p 161.

43. Kripalani J.B. 2004. *My Times: An Autobiography*, Rupa & Co. New Delhi. p 47.

44. CWMG *op.cit.* p 162

45. Gandhi M.K. 1927, 1976 Reprint. *Op.cit.* p 291.



above case too, without wasting any time, he first reported it to the Chief Officer on the Ship. Failing to get his response, he wrote to the Shipping company agent after reaching Rangoon. His letter of complaint, and Dr. Pranjivan Mehta's⁴⁶ word and influence, improved the status of sanitation to a tolerable degree during Gandhiji's return passage.

It is interesting to note that after the gap of two years of this incident, while immersed in the Champaran *Satyagraha*, Gandhiji would write a letter from Motihari on July 25, 1917 to the Secretary, Passengers' Grievances Committee, of the British India Steam Navigation Service, Rangoon. He was to discuss ill-treatment of passengers including ladies by the crew, inadequate provision of space and basic amenities, inability of the crew to control the unruly behaviour of passengers, etc. On sanitation and hygiene, the letter contained following expressions.⁴⁷

“The deck is often in a filthy condition’. There is no control over the passengers' behaviour; the result is that dirty passengers spit and eat anywhere and anyhow, much to the discomfort of the cleanly ones. Closets are filthy beyond description; closets allotted for females are often used by men; Mrs Gandhi had to be specially accompanied each time she wanted to use the closets. There are, as a rule, no locks to the doors. Bathing accommodation, such as it is, is often taken up by the crew. There is hardly any facility for washing clothes.

The letter also included recommendations like more amenities to be provided, a regular staff for maintenance, and also a medical doctor who would be in-charge of all the sanitation and hygiene besides attending to the sick, if any.

Religious Places

Gandhiji's next encounter with sanitation issue was at Hardwar in Kumbh Mela, in April 1915. Gandhiji went to personally thank Mahatma Munshiram for accommodating the Phoenix team. Held every 12 years, Kumbh Mela is attended by several lakhs of people, where sanitation has been a major issue. The Servants of India Society sent a team of senior volunteers from Poona (now Pune) to support the management of the Mela. The leader was Hriday Nath Kunjru. Dr. Dev, a surgeon from Pune and an active member of the Society was sent as the medical officer in-

46. Dr. Pranjivan Mehta was Gandhiji's lifelong friend and a benefactor. They had first met when the young Mohandas Gandhi landed in England and reached a Hotel.

47. Interested reader may find full text of the letter in CWMG Volume 13, November 1964, pp 476-7

charge. Large number of tents had been erected outside a Dharamshala to accommodate the pilgrims. Dr. Dev got pits dug for latrine. For cleaning them, he had to rely on scavengers. Gandhiji has written in the Autobiography that they had offered to cover up the excreta with earth and dispose the material appropriately.⁴⁸ The offer was readily accepted. Thus, under the leadership of Maganlal Gandhi the Phoenix team worked as scavengers in Kumbh Mela. In fact, Gandhiji makes a prophetic and telling statement in the Autobiography when he writes,

Our stay in Shantiniketan had taught us that the scavenger's work would be our special function in India.⁴⁹

Gandhiji's unease continued with general unhygienic environment in Hardwar and neighbouring locations. While meeting many sadhus, acharyas and other spiritual persons who talked about being pious, sacred and about wearing symbols such as the sacred thread – *Janeu* in Hindi - and sporting *shikha* - a tuft of hair at the back of the head to publicly identify them as being a Hindu; he could clearly sense a sharp sensitivity

48. The method calls for some explanation. After the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro civilisations that evidently revealed in Lothal Archaeological site an understanding of drainage and sewerage science among the living population then, the civilisation in India and Asia had almost lost the knowledge and wisdom pertaining to sanitation in general and handling human excreta in particular. Most population exercised open defecation which unfortunately continues even today in significant proportions. In the towns and cities whether in Asia or Europe until about middle of 16th Century, when concept of flushing the faecal matter was innovated, various methods were followed for getting rid of human excreta. Most were unhygienic. However, among them, a scientific method that came to be practiced in rural and urban areas in India was covering the excreta with earth. History suggests that in India during Mughal period the method was practiced most widely. It was called *Tatti pe Mitti*. Those interested in reading more about history of toilet in India and the world may visit <http://www.sulabh.toiletmuseum.org/history-of-toilets/> site (Accessed July 09, 2016) of Sulabh International, a very renowned group engaged in sanitation and hygiene related work in the country and also abroad.

The Phoenix team had first-hand experience in handling the human excreta using *Tatti pe Mitti* method. The Phoenix Ashram was the laboratory where various experiments in toilet building and safe and scientific disposal of human excreta were carried with fair degree of success. The human excreta were profitably used as organic fertiliser for the horticulture plantation that was done in plenty in the Phoenix Ashram campus. Maganlal Gandhi was the leader in these experiments too. A full chapter has been devoted in a book in Gujarati *Jeevan nu Parodh* by Prabhudas Gandhi, a nephew of Maganlal Gandhi who grew up in Phoenix Ashram under the direct tutelage of Maganlal Gandhi. Prabhudas Gandhi has given detailed accounts of the lives and times at Phoenix Ashram. For those interesting in reading the book may refer to Gandhi, Prabhudas, 1948. *Jeevan nu Parodh*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. Reprint 2000, Part 3 Chapter 15, *Paykhana Safai* – Toilet Cleaning pp 379-85.

49. Gandhi M.K. 1927, Reprint 1976. *op.cit.* p 292



about pollution in sacred sense; however a blunt indifference to dirt, filth and insanitation. He realised the belief of Indian public in sacredness and holiness; but the absolute lack of it in cleanliness and hygiene. Visiting Lakshman Jhoola, a location near Hardwar, he found that a scenic and beautiful gift of nature was being tainted by human beings visiting the place. He noted,

As at Hardwar, so at Hrishikesh, people dirtied the roads and the fair banks of Ganges. They did not even hesitate to desecrate the sacred water of the Ganges. It filled me with agony to see people performing natural functions on the thoroughfares and river banks...⁵⁰

This short visit to Hardwar turned out to be crucial for Gandhiji. It helped him to decide where not to live and what to work for. It may be right to say that looking at the dirt, filth and unhygienic condition of the religious places; he considered them unfit for stay. He also clearly visualised that ‘a special function in India’ for him was to attend to sanitation and hygiene.

The second religious place he visited after Hardwar was Vrindavan. His visit to Vrindavan was to visit Lord Krishna’s abode. The experiences of insanitation and lack of hygienic sense in people were repeated to upset him. In his Diary for 1915 an entry read,

APRIL 14, WEDNESDAY Left Delhi in the morning for Vrindavan. Reached Vrindavan at noon. Visit to Prem Mahavidyalaya, Rishikul, Gurukul, and Ramkrishna Mission. What filth in the city. Returned to Mathura at night and took the train to Madras.⁵¹

While making his maiden public speech to the gathering of students, teachers, Indian Maharajas, high ranking British officers and Smt. Annie Besant, at the time of inauguration of Benares Hindu University; he took up the issue of self-governance. While speaking about the ground reality, he argued that Indians as a community were severely falling short of basic attributes for self-governance. To quote,

I visited the Viswanath Temple last evening and as I was walking through those lanes, these were the thoughts that touched me. If a stranger dropped from above on to this great temple and he had to consider what we as Hindus were, would he not be justified in condemning us? Is not this great temple a reflection of our own character? I speak feelingly as a Hindu. Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as they are? The houses round

50. *Ibid* p 296

51. CWMG Volume 13 p 165

about are built anyhow. The lanes are tortuous and narrow. If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be? Shall our temples be abodes of holiness, cleanliness and peace as soon as the English have retired from India, either of their own pleasure or by compulsion?⁵²

Railways

In first two years i.e., between May 1915 and December 1917, Gandhiji travelled extensively all over India, visiting about 55 destinations and covering about 10,000 km. All of it was by railways and in third class. His first reference to sanitation and hygiene and Railways was also in his speech at the Benares Hindu University. The context was again self-governance. Describing a third class railway compartment environ Gandhiji said,

“We do not know the elementary laws of cleanliness. We spit anywhere on the carriage floor, irrespective of the thought that it is often used as sleeping space. We do not trouble ourselves as to how we use it; the result is indescribable filth in the compartment. The so called better class passengers over-awe their less fortunate brethren. Among them I have seen the student world also. Sometimes they behave no better. They can speak English and they have worn Norfolk Jackets and therefore claim the right to force their way in and command seating accommodation. I have turned the searchlight all over and as you have given me the privilege of speaking to you, I am laying my heart bare. Surely we must set these things right in our progress towards self-government.”⁵³

His travel by railway in India left deep impressions. The ill-treatment of poor third class travellers by the railway staff deeply disturbed him. He was also equally perturbed by the insensitivity, ignorance and arrogance of passengers towards the sense of hygiene and cleanliness. In July of 1916, he wrote a note titled *Railway Passengers*⁵⁴ where he commented on the problems of the third class passengers and the difficulties faced by railway staff. Two of the suggestions he made

52. *Ibid* p 212-13

53. *Ibid* p 213

54. The Editors of the CWMG have two footnotes to this item in Volume 13 pp 284-87. One says that the note was published as a pamphlet and distributed gratis to people in Gujarat. And the second note says that parts of the note were published in *Kathiavar Times* 26-7-1916.



that would have helped disappearance of 75 per cent of the problems were with respect to hygiene and cleanliness. They were as follows.

If, when you want to spit, you do so where the passengers rest their feet, the place will become extremely dirty and there is a risk of one contracting some disease; those other passengers, moreover, who are particular about rules of cleanliness will find your dirty habit intolerably painful.

If you use the railway lavatories with due care, everyone will be the happier for that. In using them carelessly, you take no thought of the passengers who may follow you.

Indeed, these two points hold full relevance even to this day although Railways have upgraded all the passengers to second class.

Like writing to the Secretary of the Passengers Grievance Committee of Shipping Company in the midst of the Champaran *Satyagraha*; he sent a letter to a Newspaper *The Leader* titled 'Third Class Travelling on Indian Railways'. The failure on the part of the railway officials to respond to his regular engagement made him to invite the Press to join the debate, thereby inviting Indian masses. While describing the hardships for the passenger, he also wrote about carelessness on the part of the railways in providing basic service. He specifically mentioned the following.

Not during the whole of the journey was the compartment once swept or cleaned. The result was every time you walked on the floor or rather cut your way through the passengers seated on the floor, you waded through dirt. The closet was also not cleaned during the journey and there was no water in the water tank.⁵⁵

Cities and Villages

In Benares address, Gandhiji mentioned division of most of the Indian cities: cantonment and the city proper. Cantonment area was used as homes for British and other government officials and may be some rich people. In the proper city, which was obviously older than the cantonment was usually a stinking den with the hamlet (mohalla) based easy going habitations that abused existing sanitation laws and civic traditions. While passing through a mohalla street, experiencing a spit from the building above would be a common experience.

55. CWMG Volume 13 p 548, interested readers should read the full text of the letter.

From Benares, Gandhiji went to Madras (now Chennai) to attend the Missionary Conference. There was his first reference to village sanitation in public speech on Swadeshi.⁵⁶ In the context of discussion on teaching in vernacular versus English, he made the following point with regard to sanitation:

Had instruction in all the branches of learning been given through the vernaculars, I make bold to say that they would have been enriched wonderfully. The question of village sanitation, etc., would have been solved long ago.⁵⁷

He also spoke at the Madras Social Service League. One of the main planks was sanitation and hygiene in the city at length. From the text of Gandhiji's speech a reader can gather that the lady who chaired the meeting took Gandhiji, prior to the meeting, to a nearby locality where the League had done some useful work in the area of sanitation and cleanliness. He referred to it in his speech and said that the Chair Lady had taken him to Pariah village and described its condition before the League's work began. Upon looking at its status after the league's work, Gandhiji found the place worth praising. He said in his speech,

After seeing the village, I make bold to state that it is a model of cleanliness and order and it is much cleaner than some of the busiest and the most central parts of Madras. That is undoubtedly a creditable piece of work on the part of the Social Service League; and if the League can penetrate into the recesses of Madras and do the same kind of work, certain things which I have noticed in Madras will be conspicuous by their absence when I next pay my visit to this great city. (Cheers.) These things stare us in the face and have got to be remedied. When our Pariah brethren are amenable to reason and persuasion, shall we say that the so-called higher classes are not equally amenable to reason and persuasion and are not amenable to hygienic laws which are indispensable in order to live the city life?⁵⁸

For Gandhiji such experience might have been *déjà vu*. The major contention that the British and European citizens had against the Indians in the cities of South Africa was real but on occasions exaggerated. Working for years with the Indian communities, Gandhiji had developed insights. Hence, he shared his ideas on working of Madras Social Service League. With visit to Kashi Vishwanath temple in mind, he shared his

56. *The Hindu* on 28th February 1916 reported his entire speech.

57. CWMG *op.cit.* p 222

58. *Ibid* p 237



experiences at the Temple and the dirt on the streets of Kashi. He had been aghast to see the same dirt in the sanctuary (he may have used it for Sanctum Sanctorum). He said,

What is true of Kashi Viswanath is true in the majority of cases in our holy temples. Here is a problem for the Social Service League. It must not be a problem for government or municipality. Immediately you begin going to schools, you leave temples alone. Before we fit ourselves for this work, we should revolutionise the educational system. We are today in a false position and I promise that we shall incur the curse of the next generation for this great tragedy enacted before us. It is a matter for thinking and redressing. The task may be herculean, but this reward will be adequate.⁵⁹

In Champaran

In the first 23 months of his return to India, Gandhiji did not have a real exposure to a village. The opportunity came and it was indeed a historical opportunity. Rajkumar Shukla, a farmer from Champaran district of Bihar had been persuading him to help his community of indigo farmers in getting relief from the exploitation of British Indigo growers and extractors. Gandhiji went to Champaran in April 1917, followed by Kasturba, Mahadev Desai and others intermittently until May 1918. They all had camped in Champaran. Gandhiji assigned two tasks of education and sanitation work to all those volunteers who had agreed to work in Champaran.

The first month in Motihari, April 1917, was devoted to understand the problem and for investigation. Gandhiji prepared and wrote notes periodically to help document the process and the work. In one of the early notes the mention of sanitation and hygiene came up. Describing the conditions of farmers called *rayat* then, Gandhiji noted,

Whilst they (Volunteers) are in the villages, they will teach the village boys and girls and will give the *rayats* lessons in elementary sanitation. It may be stated that the *rayats* are the most backward and ignorant of almost any in India. Education is admittedly in the lowest stage in this district. Sanitation is of the worst type. Children are ill-looking because they are ill fed. The adult population suffers from some disease or other.⁶⁰

59. *Ibid* p 238

60. *Ibid* p 393

After the core problem of indigo cultivation had been amicably solved in favour of the poor indigo labourers and farmers, Gandhiji decided to work and prepared a detailed programme to take up the education and sanitation issue in the hamlets and the villages.

In a speech of November 1917 at Muzaffarpur, Gandhiji informed about the work accomplished in Champaran had been. In order to live with well-earned freedom, education was necessary. He told the gathering that Babu Brijkishore and his colleagues had decided to open schools and educate the people especially in the rules of hygiene. In his words,

The intention is to give instruction in letters to boys and girls and teach them as much hygiene as they need to keep themselves clean and tidy, and teach adults how to safeguard public health and keep clean the roads, disused wells, latrines, etc. With this object, a school is to be opened in a place called Dhaka on the auspicious day of Tuesday. There is an urgent need of volunteers for this work.⁶¹

In Educational Institutions and Conferences

Gandhiji had already developed keen sense and insights in the problem of sanitation in the country. In the Social Work League meeting at Madras he indicated that education from the school age would be the key to good sanitation. No wonder when he got first opportunity to address an educational institution, he was quick to point out at the necessity of including sanitation in school and higher education curricula. Speaking at the anniversary of the Gurukul Kangdi on March 20, 1916, he said,

A knowledge of the laws of hygiene and sanitation as well as the art of rearing children should also form a necessary part of [the training of] the Gurukul lads. The sanitary arrangements at the fair left much to be desired. The plague of flies told its own tale. These irrepressible sanitary inspectors incessantly warned us that in point of sanitation all was not well with us. They plainly suggested that the remains of our food and excreta needed to be properly buried. It seemed to me to be such a pity that a golden opportunity was being missed of giving to the annual visitors practical lessons on sanitation.⁶²

Gandhiji contributed an article '*Our System of Education*,' to the Gurukul Kangdi's house magazine *Satdharma Pracharak* dated March 24, 1917, where he had specifically mentioned healthy body to be a necessary condition for taking good education and hence recommended

61. CWMG Volume 14, March 1965 p 77-78

62. *Ibid* p 264



the need to be educated in the principles of health and hygiene right from childhood.⁶³

Addressing the Second Gujarat Educational Conference in Broach (now Bharuch) in October 1917, he said that for him it was a serious blot on the state of education in the country that the educated doctors had not been able to eradicate disease such as plague. In his visits to the hundreds of homes, he did not find any evidence of knowledge about hygiene. He had made an interesting observation,

If our doctors could have started learning medicine at an earlier age, they would not make such a poor show as they do. This is the disastrous result of the system under which we are educated. People in almost all the parts of the world have managed to eradicate the plague. Here it seems to have made a home and thousands of Indians die untimely deaths. If this is to be attributed to poverty, it would still be up to the Education Department to answer why, even after 60 years of education, there is poverty in India.⁶⁴

In November 1917, Gandhiji addressed Bihar Students' Conference in Bhagalpur. How could he miss an opportunity to tell students about sanitation and hygiene! In the context of serving the country, he made reference to his letter on the third class railway travel in the press.

He advised students to behave and also educate the fellow passengers in the train:

We can explain to the other passengers in our compartment the harm that results from their dirtying the place. Most passengers respect students and listen to them. They should not then miss these excellent opportunities of explaining the rules of hygiene to the masses. The eatables sold at stations are dirty. It is the duty of students, when they find the things dirty, to draw the attention of the traffic manager to the fact, whether he replies or not.⁶⁵

In the Gujarat Political Conference

In November 1917, he attended and addressed the Gujarat Political Conference held at Godhra. He specifically brought up the urban insanitation issue. He linked it up with self-governance as it has already been shown earlier. His basic comment was that the failure had been at

63. *Ibid* p 358

64. CWMG Volume 14 p29

65. *Ibid* p 138

both the administration and the people's ends. He lamented that plague had found a home in the country. Cholera had always been there and malaria killed thousands every year. More than the responsibility of the government and the poverty among people the reason was elsewhere. He said,

It is very significant that when the plague is working havoc in our rural quarters, cantonments as a rule remain free. The reasons are obvious. In the cantonments the air is pure, houses detached, roads are wide and clean and the sanitary habits of the residents wholesome, whereas ours are as unhygienic as they well could be. Our closets are as filthy as hell. In a country in which ninety per cent of the population go barefoot, people spit anywhere and perform natural functions anywhere and we are obliged to walk on roads and paths thus dirtied. It is no wonder that the plague has found a home in our midst. Unless we alter the conditions in our cities, rid ourselves of our dirty habits and have improved latrines, swaraj can have no value for us.⁶⁶

Gandhiji, in that address, once again brought the insanitary conditions at the religious places. He said that Dakor, the abode of Lord Krishna was not far from the venue of the Political Conference. He being a staunch *Vaishnava* could be more critical than anyone else and had to admit that the insanitation of that place was so great that one used to hygienic living could hardly spend twenty four hours.

On the last day of December 1917 Gandhiji was in Kolkata and addressed a number of gatherings. One was the All India Social Work Conference. He commented on the lack of action on part of doctors as they had done precious little to tackle plague, cholera and malaria. Quoting from his experience in Champaran, he mentioned the work of small team of social workers that had fanned out in a few villages in Champaran that was teaching the village children, giving medical aid to the sick and also was giving practical lessons in hygiene to the village people. They were also engaged in cleaning wells, roads and in teaching how to treat human excreta.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Gandhiji observed insanitation, dirt and filth in most places in villages, cities, holy places, riverbanks, railways, ships, etc. He found negligence and irresponsibility on part of administrators, managers,

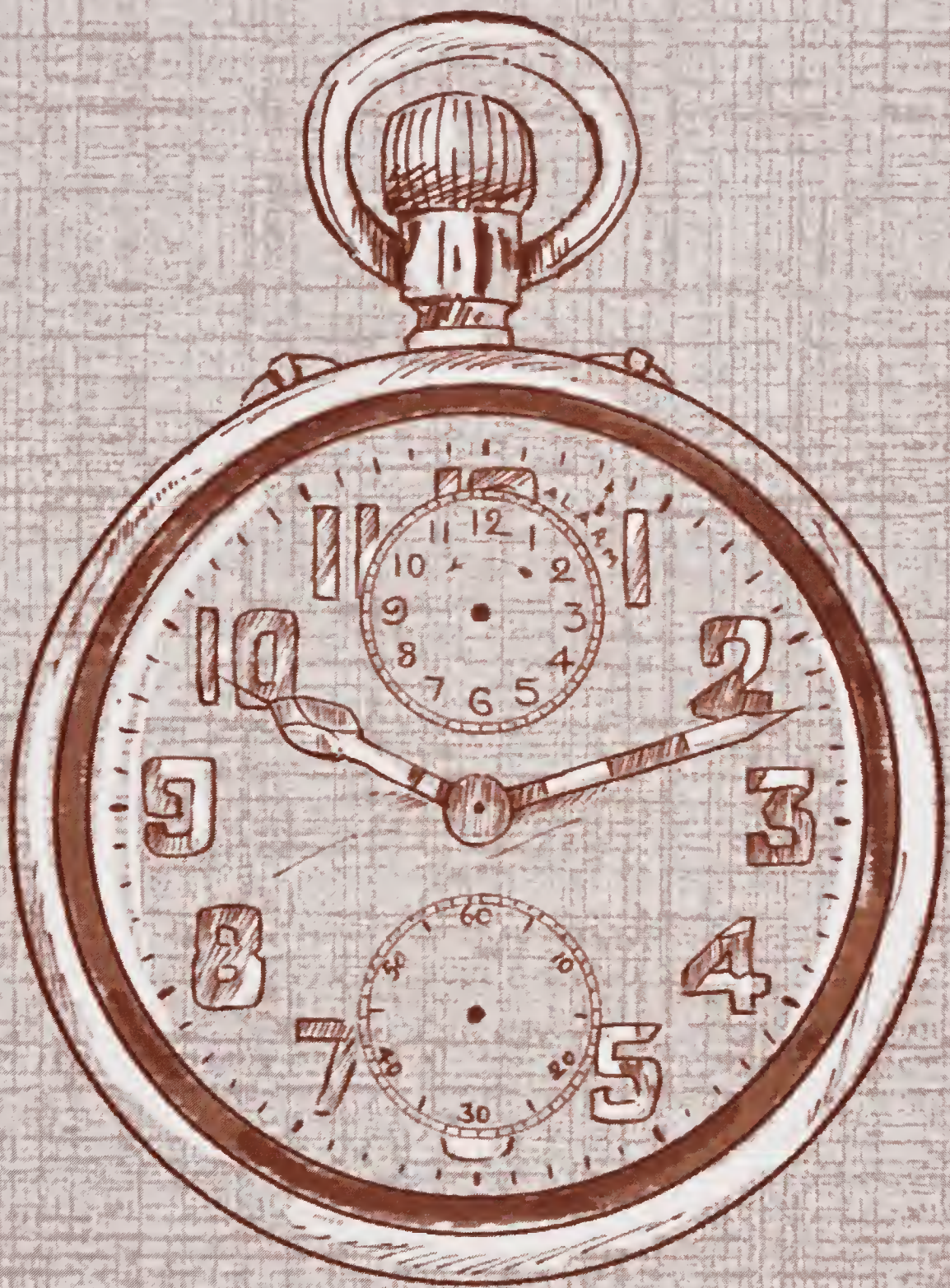
66. *Ibid* p 57

67. *Ibid* p 124



and caretakers. On the other hand, people at large were also ignorant, arrogant and irresponsible in attitude and filthy and dirty in habits. He brought up the sanitation and hygiene subject in all possible meetings and conferences, making it part of his political, social and personal agenda. In South Africa, he accepted the charge of insanitation partially, but with great mortification. Back in India not only his embarrassment continued, but also increased immensely as he encountered insanitation everywhere. He, therefore, made it a point to bring it prominently by making it an important component of the constructive programme. In the following chapter Gandhiji's work for rest of his life and ideas in improving sanitation in the country will be discussed.

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“Conservation of national sanitation is Swaraj work and it may not be postponed for a single day on any consideration whatsoever”.



Sanitising the Country: Action and Advice

Gandhiji, while travelling the length and breadth of India during first two years after returning from South Africa, had realised that sanitation and social hygiene was a huge and perhaps insurmountable problem. It was not the lack of knowledge alone but also the mind-set which prevented people from attending to the most vital problem affecting health and environs. Gandhiji understood that protest and struggle against injustice had to combine with self-improvement of the individuals and the community that was protesting. When an individual or group rises and protests against injustice, exploitation or unfairness, it is also not necessarily completely clean in heart. There is scope for improvement through self-inspection. In South Africa, Gandhiji admitted that Indians had problems with sanitation and hygiene as alleged by the British, although he successfully argued and protested that the main reason for discrimination was colour prejudice and threat of competition. However in his own country, the insanitation, dirt, filth along with taboo, stigma and exploitation attached with the scavenging community glared at him wherever he went. Gandhiji had already penned *Hind Swaraj* in 1909. In his scheme of *Gram Swaraj* and *Hind Swaraj* as self-rule, fighting for political freedom of the country could not have been a standalone proposition. Self-improvement was the key and he introduced the concept and action related to it. Later, it was conceptualised as Ashram Observances and Constructive Work. Thus, sanitation and hygiene and removal of untouchability became two major constructive programmes. In this chapter Gandhiji's experiences, comments, ideas and action programmes on sanitation and hygiene are discussed.

Gandhiji at Champaran

The seriousness of the problem of sanitation and hygiene among rural populace in the country had become evident to Gandhiji and his team of volunteers when they began their work in Champaran. The first thing that hit Gandhiji was that work of a permanent nature was impossible without proper village education. He wrote in the Autobiography 'The rayats' ignorance was pathetic'.⁶⁸ Poverty was a very serious problem. When Gandhiji was encouraging people to keep clean and maintain personal hygiene, he came across a tragic incident. He visited a village in the vicinity of Bhitiharva where he had opened a school and found some women in very soiled and dirty dresses. Gandhiji told Kasturba to ask them the reason. Visiting their huts, she was shocked to learn that the women did not have another *sari* to change!

Gandhiji and his team also noted that sanitation was a difficult affair in the villages of Champaran. Gandhiji noted that even the landless labour families were not willing to do their own scavenging. Dr. Dev who had joined the Champaran team took up regular sweeping of roads and courtyards, cleaning the wells, filling up the water pools, etc. The sanitation group was able to encourage and shame some locals to join the work. An atmosphere of self-reliance for village cleaning was built slowly. Peoples' apathy was seen in good measure as some villagers frankly expressed dislike for such work.

Gandhiji's conviction about the need of education, training and practice for orientation and aptitude led him to teach sanitation and hygiene in Champaran and in Satyagraha Ashram schools. The women of the Champaran team were told that teachings of cleanliness, hygiene and good manners had priority over literary subjects.⁶⁹ It may be noted that thenceforth sanitation and hygiene became indispensable and foundational work in all the political programmes and social reforms.

At the Ashrams

Lessons in sanitation practices had begun in Phoenix Ashram in South Africa for Gandhiji and all inmates. By the beginning of the twentieth century flush toilets were in fairly advanced stages and implications of faecal contaminations were well-known. Science and engineering of public

68. Gandhi M.K. 1927. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad 1976 Reprint. p 316

69. Readers interested in detailed account may refer Gandhi M.K. 1927. *An Autobiography op.cit.* Part V Chapter XVII 1p 316-319

health were advancing rapidly. However, adequate and assured water was critical requirement to promote and practice flush toilets connected with proper drains and disposal systems. In rural areas it was very difficult to accomplish (and still is). The challenge before Gandhiji at Phoenix was the right science and appropriate technology. As it is mentioned elsewhere, covering human excreta with adequate dry earth and safe disposal of the collected store became established practice⁷⁰ among all models. In all experiments, the excreta was finally transferred to the farm and converted into organic fertiliser. Prabhudas Gandhi has noted that if one goes through the history of Gandhiji's Ashrams carefully, one would realise that experiments in toilets had a unique place. If someone could document the process minutely from beginning to end an authentic and classic manual on toilet making and use could be prepared.⁷¹

For Gandhiji, sanitation and hygiene became an important agenda in India. Gandhiji's desire to remove the blot of untouchability from the Indian society for good compelled him to work on toilets and hygiene. He had not accepted the social tradition of the scavenging work to be done by a section of people who were condemned to do and further condemned for doing so. No wonder, when he drafted the trust deed of Sabarmati Ashram, Sabarmati on February 2, 1926, he listed five aims. The first was

The aims for which the property of the "Satyagraha Ashram" mentioned in the schedule of this document, being used area as under:

*Antyaja*⁷² uplift...⁷³

The original Constitution of the Satyagraha Ashram was drawn up by Gandhiji when it was opened on May 25, 1915 at Kochrab, Ahmedabad. The list of observances for joining was commitment to removal of untouchability among others. A salutary commitment to sanitation was a given and contained core element of social reform. The text read as follows:

II. Sanitary Service

This is an essential and sacred service and yet it is looked down upon in the society, with the result that it is generally neglected and affords considerable scope for improvement. The Ashram therefore lays special stress upon engaging no outside labour for this work. The members

70. Details are discussed in Gandhi Prabhudas, 1948. *Jeevan nu Parodh*, op. cit. p 379-85.

71. *Ibid* p 379 (Gujarati)

72. The word *Antyaja* has been used to describe in Indian Brahmanic classical literature the people who were lowest in the caste ladder. They also were untouchables.

73. Nayar Sushila, 1995. *Mahatma Gandhi Volume VI*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, p 419.



themselves attend to the whole of the sanitation in turns. New entrants are generally first of all attached to this department.⁷⁴

The text described further the type of latrines that were used in the Ashram, the ways of cleaning them and other do's and don'ts relating to hygienic practices. It was clearly stated that calls of nature were to be attended to only at places assigned for the purpose. Inmates had to take care that the roads and paths were not spoilt by spitting or otherwise. Needless to say, that in the Ashram's new campus at Sabarmati aims, observances and consequent activities had to be followed in letter and spirit.

Gandhiji would welcome the zealous, committed youth with nationalist fervour who desired to join Ashrams but would warn that she/he would have to pass the test of cleaning the toilet bucket.⁷⁵ A young man Giriraj Kishore from Rohtak, Haryana, wanted to join the Ashram in 1926. From the letter it appears that after pursuance for some period, Gandhiji allowed him in the Ashram with the following warning:

You may come. But I warn you again. I may simply give you a corner in my verandah for your abode. There may be no intellectual work for you at all and there may be all labour including, of course, sanitation work, water carrying, etc. You may be put on spinning or the like for eight hours per day.⁷⁶

Another young person, C. Narayan Rao, who apparently wanted to give up his permanent service and join Ashram, received the same caution from Gandhiji.

Are you prepared to do continuous physical labour for 8 hours per day? Can you be satisfied with mere sanitation, field work or work in the kitchen or work at the spinning-wheel and the like?⁷⁷

Gandhiji left Sabarmati Ashram at the commencement of Salt Satyagraha in March 1930 when he vowed not to return to the Ashram until India gained independence.⁷⁸ For three years he was homeless, but at

74. *Ibid* p 424-25

75. Narayan Desai, Gujarat Vidyapith Chancellor 2007-14 and son of Mahadev Desai, used to recall his Ashram days and narrate some toilet cleaning stories. The cleaning standard of cleaning the bucket containing human excreta and dry earth was that after cleaning the bucket was to be sanitised enough for serving *dal* –lentil soup, at the time of lunch!

76. CWMG Volume 32, p 36

77. *Ibid* p 377

78. On 31 July 1933, Gandhiji had formally wound up the Ashram and made the inmates vacate the premises. See Nayar Sushila, *op. cit.* p 365

frequent intervals stayed in Ashram founded and supported by Jamnalal Bajaj at Wardha, known as Maganvadi. Mirabehn – Miss Slade, Gandhi's close associate, also stayed with him at Wardha Ashram. She went for a morning walk every day and found that people of the adjacent village Sindi defecated in open on the road. When she reported this to Gandhiji he advised her to visit the village daily and clean the roads. Mirabehn soon found that people did not want to cooperate at all and perhaps they took her and the team to be good scavengers. Learning about this, on one fine morning Gandhiji announced that he would go and stay in the village and all alone. Mirabehn insisted to join and after going there it was realised that Sindi was in fact part of Wardha and not an independent village. She then went to Segaon and settled and Gandhiji joined her soon. Thus, Sevagram Ashram came up. From April 1936 to August 1946 Sevagram Ashram was Gandhiji's home.

Sanitation and hygiene was on agenda in Sevagram Ashram too. Ashram observances continued and so also the related activities. Couple of years later in the Issue of *Harijan* of October 31, 1948 'Rules of Sevagram Ashram' were published. Following is the selected text:

Everyone must wash his dish thoroughly and keep it in its place. Guest and visitors are requested to bring their own plate, drinking pot, bowls, and spoon as well as lantern, bedding, mosquito net and napkins... Everything must be kept in its proper place. All refuse must be put in the dustbin. Water must not be wasted. Boiled water is used for drinking purposes. Pots and Pans are finally washed with boiled water. Unboiled water of the Ashram wells is not safe to drink... We should not spit or clean the nose on the road, but only in an out of the way place where no one is likely to walk.

Nature's need must be attended to only at the appointed place. It is necessary to clean oneself after answering both the calls of nature. The receptacle for the solid contents is, as it always be, different from that for liquid contents of the latrines. We must wash our hands with pure earth and pure water and wipe them with a clean napkin. The night soil must be fully covered with dry earth so as not to attract flies and in such a way that nothing but dry earth is visible. One must carefully sit on the latrine seat so that seat does not get dirty. A lantern must be carried if it is dark. Everything that attracts flies should be properly covered.⁷⁹

79. M.K. Gandhi, 1955. *Ashram observances in Action*, translated from Gujarati by Valji Govindji Desai, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad p 149 – 51. Can also be accessed at Gandhi Heritage Portal. www.gandhiheritageportal.org



In all the Ashrams, sanitation and hygiene lessons were compulsory for students, as he had visualised Ashram to be a school for teaching scientific sanitation. He had expressed once during the Vykom *Satyagraha* that an Ashram should be a model of simplicity and sanitation.⁸⁰

In Public Meetings and Municipal Receptions

Gandhiji addressed many public gatherings, meetings, small groups, volunteers, women and inmates of the Ashrams. Many municipalities gave him civic receptions. On most of these occasions he brought up the subject of sanitation and hygiene.

In almost every Congress major convention Gandhi in his speech touched upon the sanitation issue.⁸¹ In April 1924, he congratulated the Congress members of Dohad (now Dahod) city for good sanitation arrangements and suggested a visit to the untouchable community localities and spread good sanitation practices among them. He similarly highly appreciated excellent sanitary arrangements in the Kanpur Congress in 1925. He penned his appreciation in the issue of *Navajivan* dated January 3, 1926.

For Gandhi, insanitation was an evil. In a speech addressing the youth on ‘Value and Possibility of Personality’ on August 25, 1925, at YMCA, Calcutta (now Kolkata), he insisted on character building. He tried to argue that simple village life was good for them and humanity. However, if someone decided to go to village, live and work there, he should have an idea how the person should approach. He had said,

He will not go out as a patron saint of the villages; he will have to go in humility with a broom-stick in his hand. There is a Trinity of Evil - insanitation, poverty and idleness- that you will have to be faced with and you will fight them with broom-sticks, quinine and castor oil and, if you will believe me, with the spinning- wheel.⁸²

Gandhi addressed in receptions and appreciations given to him by the towns and city municipalities. In several places such as Ahmedabad, Belgaum, Madras (now Chennai), Belgaum, Tumkur, Davangere, Mayavaram, Trichinopoly, Srirangam and in many other towns he drew attention towards insanitation and appealed to improve the sanitation.

80. CWMG Volume 26 p 438

81. Gandhiji also wrote in the periodicals he edited in those years providing guidelines as to how the sanitation and hygiene issues in public meetings, conventions and conferences should be handled. Interested readers should refer CWMG Volume 21 pp 51-52 and 521-23

82. CWMG Volume 28, p109

He considered sanitation work as one of the most important works of the municipalities. When Congress wanted to participate in municipal elections; his advice was that the congress workers after becoming councillors should become quality sanitation workers.⁸³

In address to Ahmedabad Municipality in 1924, he remembered what he had and his team had done in South Africa. He wanted to communicate to the gathering in Ahmedabad municipal area that both the citizens and the municipal officials had direct responsibility in handling sanitation and hygiene of the city. He said,

I used to tell him of the citizen-service I had done in South Africa-service which I am thankful was true service inasmuch as it was silent and of which most of you know nothing - and I concerted measures for improving the sanitation and health of the city. We had intended to form a committee of servants who would visit every nook and corner of the city in order to give the citizens object lessons in cleaning closets and streets and in general conservancy by doing the work ourselves. We had also intended to plan and suggest measures for the expansion of the city by opening suburbs and inviting citizens to go and settle there rather than live in congested areas.⁸⁴

Gandhiji's critique of western civilisation is known. He was also acutely aware of it. But he was never hesitant to learn and borrow a concept or a practice that was beneficial for the humanity in general. Good sanitation and hygiene practice was one of them. He developed an admiration for the municipal administration in the West with regards to sanitation. Responding to a civic reception at Belgaum on December 21, 1924 he said,

The one thing which we can and must learn from the West is the science of municipal sanitation. By instinct and habit we are used to village life, where the need for corporate sanitation is not much felt. But as the Western civilization is materialistic and therefore tends towards the development of the cities to the neglect of villages, the peoples of the West have evolved a science of corporate sanitation and hygiene from which we have much to learn. Our narrow and tortuous lanes, our congested ill-ventilated houses, our criminal neglect of sources of

83. Those interested should read speeches he made in various Congress conventions and towns and cities. Refer for instance CWMG Volumes 23, p 15, p 387, Volume 25, 40, 449, Volume 26, p 240, Volume 28, p 400, 424, 461, 466, 471, Volume 29, p 326,

84. Volume 25 p 40



drinking water require remedying. Every municipality can render the greatest service by insisting on people observing the laws of sanitation.⁸⁵

In a speech in Madras in 1925 to the Municipal Corporation President and others, he said that he was a lover of municipal work. There was a time when he had seriously considered of taking to municipal life. Fate decided otherwise. He believed that working as a municipal functionary required a great deal of plodding and that he was himself a slogger. He called himself a scavenger. In another meeting in Madras he addressed the labourers. He raised their morale by saying that they were in no way inferior to any other class of people in the country. But they also should give up drinking, insanitation, and filth. They should decline positively to live in dirty houses where there is no sunshine and where there is no air. They must keep their houses and yards absolutely clean of all dirt, and of insanitation.⁸⁶

Gandhiji visited Gaya in 1927. There too he passed through agony. The pain was more because for the Hindus Gaya has a very special religious significance. After the visit he wrote a small article titled 'Insanitary Gaya' in *Young India*. He practically addressed it to the Gaya Municipality.

I have no desire to advertise the insanitation of Gaya, a prince among the holy places of Hinduism. It was because my Hindu soul rebelled against the stinking cesspools I saw in a principal street of Gaya that I was obliged to draw pointed attention to it in my reply to the address of the Gaya Municipality. I am aware that there are many holy places which are insanitary enough.⁸⁷

Gandhiji had stated then that what he saw in Gaya was unprecedented. He wanted the municipality to take up the cause immediately. He wrote that in his expectation every municipality should constitute a model school for teaching the science of sanitation. He wanted the municipality to cover foul cesspools and arrest the dirtying of riverbank by the pilgrims and the local population. He felt that it was high time that Indian city managers developed a healthy sense of civic duty. Like the people of the West he wanted that the city managers learn the value of fresh air, clean water and clean surroundings. Gaya city, according to him, should have been first in learning this lesson as the sacred cities in India should become the role models for others. Cleanliness indeed was inseparable and essential part of truly religious life and abode.

85. CWMG Volume 25, p 461

86. CWMG Volume 26, p 240 and 380

87. CWMG Volume 33, pp 43-44

Responding to a reception given to him by the Tumkur Municipality in Karnataka in 1927, Gandhiji said,

And what have you done for hygiene and sanitation? The West has come in for much blame from me, but its hygiene and sanitation are object-lessons for us. To me, the test of a people's knowledge of sanitation is the condition of their latrines, and I am told that the state of things here is scandalous. The most orthodox and learned amongst us do not scruple to infringe the laws of sanitation, though all scriptures say that every infringement of a law of health or hygiene or sanitation is a sin. I ask you to study this question deeply and to aim at being ideal scavengers. So long as you do not take the broom and the bucket in your hands, you cannot make your town and cities clean.⁸⁸

In 1927, Gandhiji travelled extensively in South India. In Mayavaram in the present day Tamil Nadu, in the reception function hosted by the Municipality he mentioned sanitation as his favourite subject. He was terribly upset on what he saw in the streets of Mayavaram:

But I must this evening speak to you on a subject which is very dear to me,... I want to speak to you upon the sanitation of this place... I reckon sanitation also as one of the important things which a humanitarian or a reformer must tackle. Within three or four minutes' walk of the place where you have kindly housed me,... I crossed it, turned to the right... What I saw was a sight too horrible to talk about; and the stench that was coming out of it was suffocating. I saw the water of that pond was being defiled in a disgusting manner, when, at the same time, a woman was filling her pot with that same water... Surely there is something that is terribly wrong in this state of affairs. The first condition of any municipal life is decent sanitation and an unfailing supply of pure water.⁸⁹

In Periodicals

Gandhiji edited and contributed articles and notes to several periodicals. He wrote about sanitation and hygiene related issues frequently in *Navajivan* and *Young India* and later in *Harijan*. Insanitation in the villages and urban settlements in the country weighed heavily on his mind. During the Kheda Satyagraha; he wrote about the condition of home, pond and fields in regard to sanitation and hygiene in *Navajivan* of November 2, 1919. He wrote a series of articles under the heading *Jagat no Tat*⁹⁰ – father of the

88. CWMG Volume 34, p 78

89. *Ibid* pp 527-28

90. The expression is used in India from time immemorial. In an Agrarian society a farmer fed the humanity and hence he came to be addressed as such.



world. His agony was that the farmer and his family lived in such insanitary and unhygienic conditions out of ignorance and lack of concern. Some of his observations were as follows:

We have also seen that the rules of cleanliness are not followed in villages. It is said that "cleanliness is next to godliness". There is no reason why we should be dirty or live in dirty surroundings. There is no sanctity in dirt! Filth is a sign of ignorance and sloth.⁹¹

Gandhiji was more decent in using an expression 'open evacuation' in place of open defecation that is used in the national and international reports in present times! He pointed out in the article that not using latrines and open evacuation practice was the cause for many diseases. The old, children, sick and weak persons in the family and in the hamlets could not go out for evacuation and hence turned the courtyard, lanes or houses into latrines, dirtying the place and poisoning the air. He then recommended that people should build simple toilets or should have system of containers where method of covering the excreta with dry earth should be practiced with diligence. He had further observed that peasant and their families were careless with water. The spots near the wells and ponds were polluted and people out of negligence and ignorance failed to maintain the spots clean with hygienic practices.

In the issue of *Young India*, of November 19, 1925 Gandhiji in a way summed up his impression about sanitation situation in India. He wrote,

During my wanderings nothing has been so painful to me as to observe our insanitation throughout the length and breadth of the land. I do not believe in the use of force for carrying out reforms, but when I think of the time that must elapse before the ingrained habits of millions of people can be changed, I almost reconcile myself to compulsion in this the most important matter of insanitation.⁹²

C.F. Andrews, Gandhi's close friend from the days of South Africa, raised the issue of sanitation in the context of emphasis on *Charkha* by Gandhiji in the villages. His point apparently was that Gandhiji in emphasising *Charkha* had pushed the sanitation and hygiene agenda aside. To this Gandhi responded in *Young India* dated August 27, 1925. He wrote,

In this paragraph Mr Andrews has raised the question of sanitation. I am not blind to the necessity of sanitation. I became a sanitary reformer long before I discovered the charkha. I was myself carrying on at the farm

91. CWMG Volume 16, p 271

92. CWMG Volume 28, p 461

in Phoenix, Natal, experiments in burying night-soil and converting it into rich manure. We had no scavenger; we were our own scavengers,...The same treatment of night-soil is being continued at the Satyagraha Ashram on the banks of the Sabarmati... Moreover, in dealing with this question of insanitation, one has to fight against old prejudices and old habits. It is a matter of sustained education and one that cannot be dealt with without State aid. I regret to have to confess that ingrained bad habits handed down from generation to generation do not yield to persuasion. Legislation seems to me to be the only effective remedy.⁹³

Gandhiji continued to write about sanitation and hygiene at every opportunity. In *Harijan* of February 8, 1935 he dealt with the subject comprehensively. He made very pertinent observations about how Indians were oriented toward the habits relating to cleanliness. Although he never agreed, but was able to understand that the destitute, poor, and people of condemned class had come to accept insanitation as part of their lives. For others who did not suffer from economic backwardness had understood the importance of being clean and practice hygiene in their personal lives and in the houses they lived, but their indifference and guilt of commission at neighbourhood, village and town levels were high. In Gandhiji's words, the problem of sanitation and hygiene was at 'corporate' level. Interestingly, Gandhiji in the article mentioned,

Some foreign observers have testified that, of all the nations of the earth, India comes, perhaps, to the top in the observance of personal cleanliness.⁹⁴

After having quoted the above he noted that Indians were indeed good at keeping the house and the courtyard clean of dirt, insects and reptiles; but would not hesitate to shove all into the neighbour's yard! We the people have not got rid of this character even to this day. He thought that the intelligentsia comprising medical persons and students could deal with the problem provided they all worked conscientiously, intelligently, jealously and regularly.

Gandhiji's writings impacted some people across the country to become voluntary sanitary workers in the villages. Their initial enthusiasm had setbacks. In reply to their letters Gandhiji wrote an article 'Problems Confronting a Sanitary Worker', in *Harijanbandhu* of October 27, 1935. The necessary condition to become a good sanitary worker, volunteering with loyalty was only a necessary condition. A sanitary worker had to perform the

93. *Ibid*, p 122

94. CWMG Volume 60, p 190-3 for full text.



task in an enlightened manner, equipped with social and technical innovation. Probably Gandhiji had Maganlal Gandhi in mind as the ideal sanitary worker and inspector who at Phoenix and also in Satyagraha Ashram had carried out sanitation work with utmost sincerity and innovatively. Gandhiji fully recognised peoples' indifference as a formidable problem to overcome. Interestingly, the settlement of Sindi bordering Wardha became a classic example. People were indifferent and opposed to Gandhiji for taking up the work of cleaning the village of human excreta lying on roads and courtyards. Gandhiji conceded the difficulty of the work and disgust of people towards it. Gandhiji's concrete suggestions were: a regular sanitary worker with fixed hours devoted to sanitation work, to lead by example i.e., maintaining excellent standards in an around his house, and to be innovative.⁹⁵

Strangely, the human society that demonstrated to the world thousands of years ago about good sanitation management fell into deplorable practices. Handling human excreta for disposal became dreaded work and hence a taboo. Communities that were compelled to do it were relegated to the lowest step of the caste ladder of social hierarchy. Gandhiji abhorred this from his childhood days. The rural and urban communities continued to neglect their duty to sanitation and hygiene and compelled its handling to certain castes, condemning them to destitution. Ingenious person that he was, he used the nomenclature in practice to signify a professional doing the same work. He became a practicing sanitation worker and called himself by the same name that was used by the society to identify sanitary worker and the caste. He also created a community of such sanitation workers in Ashrams. And then in the issue of November 28, 1936 of *Harijan* he wrote an article 'The Ideal Safai Karyakar'.⁹⁶

Gandhiji was in eminent position to write the article. He had years of practice in experimenting and perfecting sanitation in the house and neighbourhood i.e., – the Ashram settlements: Phoenix, Tolstoy Farm, Satyagraha Ashrams at Kochrab and Sabarmati in Ahmedabad and Sevagram Ashram in Wardha were the abodes where scientific sanitation was practiced. After establishing the indispensable nature of the work by a sanitation worker, Gandhiji argued that the society might be able to do without a Brahmin, but not without a sanitary worker. Like a mother washing her baby of the dirt and insured its health, a sanitary worker would safeguard the health of the entire

95. Readers interested in the article may refer to CWMG Volume 62, pp 70-72

96. Gandhiji had not used the word Safai Karyakar, but a word which was used in those days for a human excreta handler and his/her caste. There is sensitivity involved and hence the original use is avoided. For the entire article refer CWMG Volume 64, pp 86-88.

community. Brahmin many a times failed to do the duty, but the sanitary worker was bound by his duty and continued to perform under all odds and insults. Gandhiji argued that if the Indian society had given due recognition and status to the sanitary workers' communities deservingly equivalent to that of Brahmin, Indian villages would have been clean and sanitised. Describing the qualities of an ideal sanitary worker Gandhiji wrote the following:

What qualities should such an honoured servant of society exemplify in his person?... (he) should have a thorough knowledge of the principles of sanitation. He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed and the correct way of cleaning it. He should know how to overcome and destroy the odour of excreta and the various disinfectants to render them innocuous. He should likewise know the process of converting night-soil and urine into manure... That presupposes a scientific knowledge of the requirements of his profession. He would likewise be an authority on the subject of disposal of night-soil in small villages as well as big cities and his advice and guidance in the matter would be sought for and freely given to society. (he) regard(s) the maintenance of healthy and sanitary condition within the same as the *summum bonum* of his existence.⁹⁷

These are the qualities of a thorough professional sanitary worker working in rural areas even today. Gandhiji wrote about the lack of good instruments and equipment to handle excreta and dirt. After eighty years of Gandhiji's clear vision of professionalising the sanitary work, we have failed to put it in action on the ground particularly in villages and urban slums and in old city settlements.

Gandhiji's concern with sanitation continued and one is able to find a small note in the issue of August 18, 1946 in *Harijan* titled 'Limit to Insanitation'. He was upset by the insanitary conditions of Panchgani where he went to spend some time to convalescence. A place such as Panchgani known for health recovery and also Mahabaleshwar, an adjoining health resort, both had high degree of insanitation. He lamented the deplorable condition and said that the main fault was with the people. In South Africa he had partly admitted the duality in behaviour of Indians about hygiene at individual and collective levels with great mortification, but in 1936 he made frank and full admission and wrote 'the truth of it has to be admitted with sorrow'. We, Gandhiji's countrymen and women, have still a very long way to follow.

97. *Ibid* p 87



Sanitation Lessons for Constructive Workers and Students

From the day he drafted the model rules for Provincial Congress Committee early in 1921 to the last day of his life when he finalised the draft for the Lok Sevak Sangh, sanitation work for constructive workers remained one of the central agenda. He never missed an opportunity to instruct the village panchayats, panchayat workers, volunteers, constructive workers and the leaders about unacceptable insanitation in habitations and homes. He emphasised the need for education in sanitation to all in rural and in urban areas. His commitment to sanitation was so total that he included sanitation education from primary school onwards. In the draft model rules for Provincial Congress Committee he outlined the role of panchayat and wrote,

Each such Panchayat shall be responsible for the primary education of every child, male or female, residing in the village, for the introduction of spinning-wheels in every home, for the organization of hygiene and sanitation therein, and for carrying out all the other items of the Non-co-operation Resolution of the Congress in so far as it is applicable to such village.⁹⁸

As early as in 1933, he wrote in October 14, 1933 Issue of *Harijan* about a Harijan Sevak in the making. He expected that a volunteer working for the cause of untouchability should be bold and demonstrate his courage in integrating the condemned people with the rest. Working with Harijan families was also equally important. The worker should necessarily take up education of the family and the children of traditional sanitary workers. In this context Gandhiji wrote,

For teaching does not mean only a knowledge of the three R's (Reading Writing and Arithmetic). It means many other things for Harijan humanity. Lessons in manners and sanitation are the indispensable preliminaries to the initiation into the three R's.⁹⁹

On an evening in January 1935 Prof. Winsor of St. Stephen's College Delhi called on Gandhiji with a dozen of students. While replying to question of helping village people with medical aid, Gandhiji said that they should be teaching sanitation, and hygiene as prevention and after-care were more important and relevant. Distributing a thousand malaria pills was good but not congratulatory. Lessons of prevention by filling up cesspools, draining the waste water, dredging of wells and cleaning up tanks would earn high

98. CWMG, Volume 19, p 217

99. CWMG, Volume 56, p 91

appreciation. Gandhiji time and again, said that for him lessons in personal hygiene and sanitation were of prime importance and priority. When asked for his guidance about teaching in the school for Harijans, Gandhiji reiterated his unmistakable priority for lessons in sanitation and hygiene. He said,

Let me assure you that education in three R's is as nothing compared to a sound grounding in the elements of hygiene and sanitation... Literary training by itself is not of much account. Take care of the essentials I have told you. Remember that unlettered persons have found no difficulty in ruling over large States. President Kruger could hardly sign his own name. Teach them the three R's by all means, but don't make a fetish of them.¹⁰⁰

In March 1936 Gandhiji addressed the volunteers of the fifth meeting of Gandhi Seva Sangh. In every meeting he emphasised the importance of village sanitation and suggested each sevak to be first a sanitation worker. Once both parties understand each other, people would follow proper directions. He said,

Till then, let us scavenge for them, distribute some medicines and teach them the laws of sanitation. Let us not go there as physicians. Let us be satisfied with giving the medicines which they accept. Let us not expect any further rewards. Let us not be worried whether or not we give financial help, whether or not they are indifferent. I have repeatedly told the village workers that they should not feel disappointed. Have they not turned themselves into sweepers? And a sweeper is satisfied even with the left-overs.¹⁰¹

Gandhiji gave the message to all types of workers and volunteers wherever he met them. Addressing a meeting of the All India Village Industries Association workers in Wardha in May 1936, he identified three major problems in the villages. He said,

We have to tackle the triple malady which holds our villages fast in its grip: (1) Want of corporate sanitation; (2) Deficient diet; (3) Inertia.¹⁰²

By corporate sanitation he meant village sanitation. He advised the workers that setting up of industries and production programmes had to be necessarily preceded by improvement in village sanitation. He wanted the workers to remove filth and eradicate habits from the communities that gave rise to uncleanness. The suggested way of doing was personal example and education of people.

100. CWMG Volume 60, p 120

101. CWMG Volume 62 p 239

102. *Ibid* p 379



In early December he had discussions with students of village worker school at Wardha. The students had come to Gandhiji for requesting to discontinue the village visits in the evening for singing *bhajans* as their examinations were approaching. In the discussions that followed some students asked about profession of a 'safai karyakar', and to that Gandhiji advised them to read the article that he had written on an ideal safai karyakar. He further added that the traditional sanitary workers in the village had been relegated

to live in squalor and dirt, we are doing no better . You cannot reform him unless you reform yourselves, unless you set about the task with a passion that you momentarily import into your studies. The task of rural sanitation is no easy one, it means nothing less than raising the village safai karyakar to the status of an ideal safai karyakar.¹⁰³ The whole subject is unexplored; the profession, far from being a dirty one, is a purifying, life-protecting one. Only we have debased it. We have to raise it to its true status.¹⁰⁴

In late December 1936, he congratulated the Congress volunteers and said that the educated 'safai karyakars' would be able to accomplish good sanitation and that the traditional ones were not trained for it.¹⁰⁵

In the next ten years Gandhiji continued to tell students and workers about the importance of sanitation work and advised them to take it up as the first task. From 1946 to January 1948 he intensified his emphasis on education for sanitation and hygiene. For instance, in 1946 in a conference of Constructive Workers in Madras, he offered himself to become a sweeper and teach sanitation. Railway and ship travel according to him offered best chances of public education on sanitation and hygiene. A report on Gandhiji's meeting with the women agents of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust in March 1946 notes,

Asked as to what work he would lay most emphasis on, so far as women were concerned, Gandhiji felt that sanitation and hygiene, owing to the lack of knowledge of which our people suffered so greatly, should take first place.¹⁰⁶

Gandhiji left Sevagram Ashram for the last time on August 26, 1946. Three days before leaving Sevagram, he addressed the Trainees of

103. The original word used by Gandhiji has been substituted.

104. CWMG Volume 64 p 105

105. *Ibid* p 200

106. CWMG Volume 83, p 331

Basic Teachers in a camp. Sanitation and Hygiene was on agenda on that day too. He said:

One of the complaints that has been made by one of you is that too much emphasis is laid here on manual work. I am a firm believer in the educative value of manual work... Our present educational system is meant for strengthening and perpetuating the imperialist power in India. Those of you who have been brought up under it have naturally developed a taste for it and so find labour irksome. No one in Government schools or colleges bothers to teach the students how to clean the roads or latrines. Here cleanliness and sanitation form the very Alpha and Omega of your training. Scavenging is a fine art you should take pains to learn.¹⁰⁷

Sanitation as Constructive Programme and its Implications

As amply demonstrated, Gandhiji had great concern for the sanitation issue. He intensely felt that insanitation was a blot on Indians. He wanted the Indians to improve and match the standards of West in the physical aspect of sanitation. Gandhiji sensed that political independence was just a first step towards reconstruction of the country. The rural India had to be reconstructed. He called it *Gram Swaraj*. To move towards the *Gram Swaraj* he suggested 18 constructive programmes. One of them was Village Sanitation. His vision of New India was a reconstructed rural India. In 1945 he had shared this vision with Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhiji wrote,

You will not be able to understand me if you think that I am talking about the villages of today. My ideal village still exists only in my imagination. After all every human being lives in the world of his own imagination. In this village of my dreams the villager will not be dull-he will be all awareness. He will not live like an animal in filth and darkness. Men and women will live in freedom, prepared to face the whole world. There will be no plague, no cholera and no smallpox. Nobody will be allowed to be idle or to wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to do body labour.¹⁰⁸

Gandhiji wanted to modernise village. Good sanitation and hygiene were sine qua non. Hence Gandhiji tried to formalise it as one of the Constructive Programmes. The text that he wrote titled 'Village Sanitation' is short and precise. The text is important and hence reproduced below.

6. VILLAGE SANITATION

Divorce between intelligence and labour has resulted in criminal negligence of the villages. And so, instead of having graceful hamlets

107. CWMG Volume 85, p 199

108. CWMG Volume 81, p 320



dotting the land, we have dung-heaps. The approach to many villages is not a refreshing experience. Often one would like to shut one's eyes and stuff one's nose; such is the surrounding dirt and offending smell. If the majority of Congressmen were derived from our villages, as they should be, they should be able to make our villages models of cleanliness in every sense of the word. But they have never considered it their duty to identify themselves with the villagers in their daily lives. A sense of national or social sanitation is not a virtue among us. We may take a kind of a bath, but we do not mind dirtying the well or the tank or river by whose side or in which we perform ablutions. I regard this defect as a great vice which is responsible for the disgraceful state of our villages and the sacred banks of the sacred rivers and for diseases that spring from insanitation.¹⁰⁹

The things involved in village sanitation even today are the same as listed by Gandhiji. Village tanks, wells and other water bodies are to be kept clean, dung heaps to be removed. Lanes and streets are to be cleaned of rubbish. Part of dung, dirt and rubbish can be turned to valuable manure. Rags and waste paper should be recycled to make paper. Human excreta should also be turned to manure. Gandhiji recommended Dr. Poor's method of handling human excreta and it provided scientific explanation to our traditional *tatti pe mitti* method of safe and useful disposal.¹¹⁰ Lot more improvements have been done now in handling human excreta, although only a very few of them are for turning the excreta into manure. Water bodies are to be earmarked by purpose: for animals, for bathing and washing and for drinking and domestic purposes. Gandhiji said, "an ideal village will be so constructed as to lend itself to perfect sanitation". Education for sanitation and the rural volunteer's training for becoming 'an ideal safai karyakar' are two most important requirements to improve village sanitation.

The towns and cities are realities of modern times. Gandhiji realised it. He expressed more than once that West could teach urban sanitation to Indians and Indians should develop humility to learn. He also commented

109. CWMG Volume 75, p 153

110. An interesting compilation of Gandhiji's writings was published in August 1945 titled 'India of My Dreams'. In this compilation the compiler R.K. Prabhu in the words of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, 'has proved his skill making a selection the most telling and significant passages from Mahatma Gandhi's writings'. Two chapters 'Village Sanitation' and 'Urban Sanitation' are of relevance here and important portions are discussed above. For full articles refer, Gandhi, M.K. 1947. *India of My Dreams* Compiled by R.K. Prabhu. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. p 134-37 and 166-68. December 2012 Reprint.

that no municipality could cope with insanitation and congestion by taxing people and by paying for sanitation services. Voluntary co-operation of rich and poor was necessary. In 1939 in *Harijan* he came down heavily on the maladministration of the municipalities and held the councillors responsible for the non-performance.

In Prayer Meetings

The political independence was in sight but communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims suffered severe setback. Offensives and violence from both the sides, devastated the communities. Gandhiji was a deeply disturbed man. Rest of his life was spent in wiping the tears of sufferers. It is most significant that even in such times of distress and disturbances, Gandhiji maintained inner calm. His personal hurt and melancholies did not come in way of the ‘one man army’ who was out to manage and control the damages of one of the worst manmade disasters in the country. His evening prayers in public had become succour to suffering people and perhaps also a solace to the self. Gandhiji displayed exceptional sense of preparedness to work and advice on sanitation. He foresaw another disaster waiting to engulf human lives if proper and adequate steps for maintaining sanitation and hygiene in the refugee camps and the devastated villages and settlements in urban areas were not taken.

Bengal witnessed the first wave of big communal clashes towards the end of 1946. Gandhiji left for Bengal. On November 10, 1946 he sent first warning to the head of the Province, Shahid Suhrawardy, where he drew his attention to unsatisfactory sanitation after the riots in the locality he had visited in Dattapara.¹¹¹

On February 2, 1947 *The Hindu* reported Gandhiji’s activities in Bengal. The report noted that Gandhiji was infusing courage and also telling the majority that it was their duty to protect the minority. He was placing before both communities his ideal of brotherly living and also a programme of sanitation and rural economy to help both communities to better and healthier living.¹¹²

The Hindu of March 2, 1947 reported Gandhiji’s efforts with the help of the notes from his walking diary. In Dharampur, Bengal in a Prayer Meeting, he was asked about his actions regarding the dirt and insanitation in most of the places of his visit. Gandhiji’s reply was readiness to work

111. CWMG Volume 86, p 105.

112. *Ibid* p 417



with pleasure as he was a lover of cleanliness and sanitation for over fifty years. He was pained to see the tanks in Noakhali being used for drinking and cleaning and bathing purposes simultaneously. The chronic breach of the laws of sanitation by people thoughtlessly dirtying the streets, lanes and footpaths by spitting and clearing noses was resulting into disease and death.

In March 1947, he visited the riot torn villages in Bihar. On March 13, 1947 he addressed a prayer meeting in Patna. In the meeting he said,

The village I visited today was more unclean than the one I visited yesterday. Rains will make it even worse. Someone has recorded that India is strewn with excrement. One cannot contradict him if one visits the villages. Every corner in the village we visited was dirty. The lanes were very filthy and the roads were in a shabby state. I would call upon you to clean up these villages so that they reflect the cleanliness of your hearts. Besides contributing money you should be prepared for the work of sanitation. If you do not clean up the villages, how can I ask the Muslims to return to their homes? It is your duty to start the cleanliness drive from today. If your hearts are clean, the Muslims will surely return. I myself wish to undertake sanitation work. I have done this work in my time; but now I do not have the physical strength to do it.¹¹³

On August 15, 1947 India became Independent, and fresh violence broke out. Delhi became the centre for refugees from within the country and from Pakistan. The exodus was huge. Indian Government was still taking charge and it was constrained in a number of ways. Gandhiji came to Delhi and visited the refugee camps.¹¹⁴ His prayer meeting every evening was attended by large crowds. He made it a point to assuage the hurt feelings of the communities, spread the message of love and peace, share his sadness and sorrow and in between also emphatically discuss sanitation. On September 14, 1947 he spent few minutes of prayer meeting to talk about his visits to Muslim and Hindu refugee camps. In the Muslim camp, for the first time he observed the squalor of unbearable stench and nobody had been bothering to clean up the place. Had he been its commander, he would have never tolerated such a status of a camp. He was pained. He observed that the military and police should have pickaxe and shovels to clean up. Hindus and Muslims together should have come forward to clean and sanitise places. He

113. CWMG Volume 87, p 79

114. Gandhiji was a sad person. He had not been part of the decision on partition of India. Gandhiji was in Kolkata from 9 August to 8 September 1947 visiting the riot torn areas and refugee camps pacifying people appealing for peace. On August 31, 1947 a group of angry Hindus attacked him with stones and sticks but he was unhurt.

told the prayer gathering that he was pained to see the treatment meted out to the Hindus who had come as refugees. He did not think that it was their fault in escaping here and hence should the local population not treat them well and keep them in clean places? He remembered his experience years back in Kumbh Mela of Hardwar. He observed,

I had worked with pickaxe during the Kumbh Mela at Hardwar. We used to be in charge of all the jobs concerning the camp sanitation. Everybody was trained for that type of work. So I would say that whoever may be in charge of these camps, I am not bothered if he is a Muslim or a Hindu, his first and foremost job is to keep his camp absolutely clean. This involves no expenditure. If there are no shovels in the camps, it is the duty of the Government to provide them. If the Government does not provide them with shovels, if it is so busy that it has no time to spare, then the camp commander has to provide the shovels. Just as it is the duty of the Government to reach food to the camps, it is also its duty to make arrangements for sanitation, drinking water and water for washing purposes. Because there is no proper sewage arrangement, cholera spreads. Camp sanitation should never be imperfect.¹¹⁵

Sanitation and hygiene was very much on Gandhiji's mind because what he was seeing in the refugee camps disturbed him deeply. On October 13, 1947 he again raised the subject. He told the gathering then that he attached great importance to this problem of cleanliness and status of sanitation in refugee camps. He told that although Indians had some experience in organising fairs, religious gatherings and Congress sessions and conferences, but as a population we were not accustomed to camp life. Indians lacked sense of social hygiene leading to dangerous levels of insanitation with attendant risk of outbreak of infectious and contagious diseases.

On November 12, 1947, Gandhiji visited a refugee camp in Kurukshetra, where he witnessed gross indiscipline of all kinds. In the prayer meeting he declared that refugee Punjabi population from Pakistan, as other Indian population, had utter lack of knowledge of social hygiene and sanitation. It is for this trait of the country's population he thought that everyone of us should first become Harijan so that we could learn lessons in sanitation and then practice it.¹¹⁶

On November 22, 1947 in the prayer meeting in Delhi, Gandhiji shared the insanitation problem in the refugee camp at Kurukshetra housing

115. CWMG Volume 89, p 183-4

116. CWMG Volume 90, p 15



more than 2 lakh rich and poor Hindus and Sikhs refugees from Lahore. Gandhiji observed that if all the refugees became ideal campers in the matter of outer and inner cleanliness and if the rich and professional persons like doctors, lawyers, students, etc., lived with poor as equal and get involved in some productive work, it would not only lighten the financial burden on the Government of India, but also in improvement of the camp habitat.¹¹⁷ Gandhiji expected that the city people would also be shamed by this ideal behaviour and would participate in improving the life in refugee camps.

On December 27, 1947 addressing a prayer meeting in Sambhal village, Gandhiji brought up the sanitation issue. It appears that he was there because in that village Hindu majority did not harm a very small Muslim population. Besides general issues, he also discussed sanitation and said,

I do not know how clean you keep your village. But it is your paramount duty to make yourselves strong. You must keep yourselves clean externally and internally. Your village should be free of dirt and dung in every way. And it should be free from foul smells. You should follow the rules of sanitation.¹¹⁸

Gandhiji's life was heading towards a sudden and violent end. It should be clear that for him sanitation and hygiene was an integral part of social reform and hence a priority area for work in public arena. He expected both, commitment and professionalism. After the country secured political independence, he wished the Congress to turn into a social service organisation. He named it Lok Sevak Sangh. On January 29, 1948, a day before he was martyred, he drafted the Constitution for the proposed Lok Sevak Sangh. Later it came to be known as Gandhiji's Last Will and Testament. In this document the sixth function of a sevak was drafted as under.

6. He shall educate the village folk in sanitation and hygiene and take all measures for prevention of ill health and disease among them.¹¹⁹

Sanitation and hygiene was and had remained a priority for Gandhiji all his life and it appeared in his last Will too.

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117. *Ibid* p 84

118. *Ibid* p 307

119. *Ibid* p 528



“Corporate cleanliness can only be ensured if there is a corporate conscience and a corporate insistence on cleanliness in public places”.



Heart, Head and Hand for 'Untouchables'¹²⁰

Removal of untouchability was a personal, social, religious and political agenda for Gandhiji. Sanitation for him was not limited to having clean and hygienic toilets, streets, and waste disposal, but it extended to integrating the scavenging and other communities that had become untouchable for centuries in the Indian society. Liberty and equality for every individual on earth was the most cherished goal for Gandhiji. In his view India would remain insanitary if untouchability was not completely removed from the society. Hence, the tribute to Gandhiji would remain underpaid if we as a society fail to respond comprehensively to do away with the social sickness of untouchability. Gandhiji did not merely take an intellectual position on the issue, but was emotionally committed to it and spent his life in removing this blemish from the Indian society. He was out to sanitise the orthodox Hindu mind-set with all embracing love for the untouchables. In this chapter an attempt is made to present a brief review of Gandhiji's feelings on untouchability, and his thoughts and action for the removal of this menace.

Feeling by Heart

In childhood, emotions seemingly play important part in learning. In case of Gandhiji there were certain instances during his childhood when some sentiments got stimulated and impressions from such exposures came to stay with the boy Mohandas. He retained the values ingrained in the exposures as lifelong values. Gandhiji documented them in the

120. The word is used throughout the chapter and elsewhere in the book with sincere apologies to the most oppressed classes in the country. Since the word oppressed also implies all those who are made subservient forcefully, the social exclusion part with a strong prejudice against physical touch gets missed out.

Autobiography. He noted, ‘two other incidents belonging to the same period have always clung to memory’. The period referred to here is when Gandhiji was about twelve years old. One was about reading a book *Shravana Pitribhakti Nataka* and then watching a visual related to the theme of the book he had read. In the bioscope he saw Shravana carrying, by means of slings fitted for his shoulders, his blind parents on a pilgrimage. The visual left an indelible impression on young Mohandas’s mind and he said to himself then; ‘Here is an example for you to copy’. The second incident that captured and moved his heart was watching of a play *Harishchandra*. ‘It haunted me and I must have acted Harishchandra to myself many times’. What inspired the boy in that age was the ideal to follow truth and go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through. Gandhiji was nearing sixty when he wrote his autobiography and he noted, ‘I should be moved as before if I were to read those plays again today’.¹²¹

Around the same time he also went through the experience of family members’ dealing with a person named Uka. Mohandas failed to understand why Uka – a scavenger, who came to remove the night soil and sweep the courtyard, should not be touched or why he was supposed to take extra care not to get brushed by him either. If by chance he touched or got touched he had to take a bath and cleanse himself of the ‘unholy touch’. Mother also had instructed that if any such ‘touch’ happened in school, he should touch a Muslim to become pure again! Pyarelal notes that Mohandas had many a tussle with his parents over this question. It was only out of reverence that he did as he was told.¹²² Mohan’s heart rebelled and he told his mother that he did not consider physical contact with Uka sinful. Boy Mohan’s argument was that in the Vishnu Puja a verse he learned by heart and chanted was ‘‘जलेविष्णुः स्थले विष्णुः’’ If Lord Vishnu pervades water and land then how could he not be in Uka? This childhood sensitivity towards the sanitary workers not only remained with Gandhiji, it also prompted him to act resolutely all his life to the removal of untouchability in India.

Boy Mohandas loved and revered his mother. Yet at an emotional plane he felt that Uka was as human as he was because a part of Vishnu should be there in him too. At a very mature stage in life when he was sixty two he became emotional in his expression arguing his point of view with Ambedkar, who was arguing for definite political space for untouchables

121. All quotes in the paragraph are from Gandhi M.K. 1927. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1976 Reprint p 4.

122. Pyarelal 1965 op cit.p. 217

in India. Gandhiji was on fast and intense discussions were on. Ambedkar met Gandhiji on September 22, 1932 at the historical venue under the Mango Tree in Yeravda Prison in Pune. He was brilliantly arguing his case and Gandhiji could also sense the intensity of his emotions. He repeated, *'I wish to tell the Hindus that I should be assured of my compensation'*.¹²³ Gandhiji perhaps registered that Ambedkar repeatedly used 'I' instead of us or community. Perhaps all the condemnation, insult and hardships that had deeply hurt Ambedkar in his early life came gushing back when he was negotiating for the community and he put his first person seeking compensation via political power. It is to this that Gandhiji gave a passionate and an extensive response. He wanted to convey to Ambedkar that he also felt the emotions like the latter had. Gandhiji said,¹²⁴

I will not get angry even if you spit on my face. I say this with God as witness. I know that you have drunk deep of the poisoned cup.

And the next sentences that Gandhiji uttered could only come from the deep recesses of heart full of emotions. He said,

However, I make a claim which will seem astounding to you. You are born an untouchable but I am an untouchable by adoption. And as a new convert I feel more for the welfare of the community than those who are already there.

Further he said,

I learnt the lesson of democracy at the tender age of 12. I quarrelled with my mother for treating the domestic sweeper as an untouchable. That day I saw God in the form of a Bhangi. You spoke the truth when you said that the welfare of untouchables is dearer to you than my own life. Now be honest and stick to it. You should not care for my life. But do not be false to Harijans.

It needs to be clearly understood that Gandhiji's own realisation of the hurt of the condemned community was at heart followed by mind (head). It should be recalled that he too suffered rejection, condemnation and prejudice when he was barely 24. The dramatic event took place at

123. Ambedkar opened the dialogue saying, "We must accept that in the country there are two groups belonging to two different ideologies and act accordingly, and I should get my compensation. I also want that a clear understanding should be arrived at which would recompense me in other respects also".

124. Verbatim recording of this meeting was done by Mahadev Desai. Refer, *The Oxford India Gandhi* Compiled and Edited by Gopalkrishna, Gandhi 2008. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. p 344-45. For full text refer CWMG Volume 51, p 458-60. Original Gujarati from *Mahadevbhaini Diary*, Volume 1



Pietermaritzburg station, capital of Natal on the night of May 31, 1893. The incident that changed Gandhiji's life has been discussed and analysed intellectually, but it should be reviewed from emotional angle as well.

It is the insult that one feels and not thinks. A young England trained Barrister boarded the train with a first class ticket. His entitlement legally was like any other passenger holding proper ticket. The railway official told him to move to van compartment. When Gandhiji said that he carried a first class ticket, another official said, "that doesn't matter, I tell you, you must go to the van compartment". When Gandhiji further insisted that he was permitted to travel in first class the official said that he won't be allowed and if Gandhiji did not leave on his own, he would call a police constable. And it was a constable who took Gandhiji by hand and pushed him out. The luggage was also brought down. Young Barrister Gandhi felt insulted. It is reflected when he wrote later in the Autobiography the following:

Maritzburg being at a high altitude, the cold was extremely bitter. My over-coat was in my luggage, but I did not dare to ask for it lest I should be insulted again.¹²⁵

There was no light in the waiting room of the railway station. He sat there shivering, a passenger came on around midnight and tried to strike a conversation but Gandhiji was in no mood to talk. It is then, Gandhiji wrote, that he began to think of his duty. In thinking he admitted to himself that he was insulted and should he proceed to Pretoria without minding the insult. After deep thinking he resolved to stay and fight against the colour prejudice. However, the insults did not end there. Further insults awaited him in the stagecoach that he took from Charlestown to Johannesburg. The coach conductor known as 'leader' asked him to take the seat besides the driver of the coachbox. Gandhiji noted that he knew the grave injustice involved in the behaviour of the leader. Gandhiji fretted over the insult but took the coach. Worse was yet to come. At Pardekoph, the leader wanted to sit on his regular seat that he had offered to Gandhiji and smoke. So he took a dirty sackcloth piece and spread it on the footboard and told Gandhiji, 'Sami, you sit on this...' the insult was unbearable and Gandhiji protested only to be mercilessly beaten up by the stagecoach leader. Gandhiji, at the moment, sensed danger to his life. But he steadfastly held the grip on the mettle handle. He was saved with the intervention of the White passengers. The leader let Gandhiji alone but continued threatening Gandhiji of dire consequences at Standerton. Fortunately, some Indians showed up, who came to take him to the host.

125. M.K. Gandhi. Autobiography *op sit* p 82.

In Johannesburg, he tried to get accommodation at the Grand National Hotel only to be politely told by the Manager that the hotel was full. When Gandhiji narrated the incident to Abdul Gani Sheth, waiting for him at a trader's shop, he gave a laugh and said, 'for making money, we do not mind pocketing insults'. And once again from Johannesburg to Pretoria Gandhiji was in the first class railway compartment only to be insulted again when the guard came to examine the ticket and said, 'remove to the third class'. When the English co-passenger intervened and comforted Gandhiji to relax, the guard left muttering, 'If you want to travel with a coolie, what do I care?'

At the final destination, Pretoria, the British ticket collector at the railway station was of little help when Gandhiji checked with him for some decent hotel in the city. It was an American Black who took him to another American Johnston's Family Hotel. The owner, generous and not colour conscious, offered him accommodation but requested to dine in the room so as not to offend the White diners in the dining room. Of course, he was kind enough to check with the diners and upon their agreement came back to Gandhiji immediately and offered him a place in the dining room. Thus, it should be clear from above that the young barrister Gandhi went through a series of insults and humiliation in that single travel from Durban to Pretoria.

Gandhiji realised that to be a 'coolie' and live in Transvaal was not easy.¹²⁶ Indians were not supposed to walk on public footpaths, and could not be outdoors after 9 p.m. without a permit. Gandhiji experienced prejudice and assault himself once despite having a letter authorising him to be out of doors at all hours without police interference. He used to take late evening walks and walk past Transvaal President's house. Once he was also kicked and pushed from the footpath onto the street by a security guard who did so without the slightest warning. His friend Mr Coates was passing on horseback at that time and told Gandhiji that he should sue the guard and he would testify in the court. But by that time, Gandhiji had already resolved that he would not seek redress for personal grievance or hurt.

When Gandhiji went to Transvaal in 1893 the Indians had won some concessions for living and trading. The 1886 Arbitration Award was in force.¹²⁷ But conditions of Indians had continued to be pathetic. In Chapter two in *Satyagrah in South Africa* Gandhiji has described the status of Indian

126. For the humiliating life in Transvaal see Gandhi, M.K. *Autobiography op. cit.* p 95-7.

127. Shriman Narayan (General Editor), 1968. *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume Three Satyagraha in South Africa*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.



settlers and settlements in Transvaal. Gandhiji after looking at the locations for Indian settlers had commented that the Indians had become Panchamas of the Transvaal. He wrote,

It can be truly said that there is no difference between these locations and untouchable's quarters in India. Just as Hindus believe that touching (Dalits¹²⁸) or residence in their neighbourhood would lead to pollution, so did the Europeans in the Transvaal believe for all practical purposes that physical contact with Indians or living near them would defile them.¹²⁹

Gandhiji realised what it was to be a 'coolie' and 'sami' in South Africa. In the Autobiography at the end of the chapter 'What is it to be a 'Coolie', he noted 'I saw that South Africa was no country for a self-respecting Indian' and equated this experience with that of an untouchable in India. It was his innate sensitivity and the felt experience that made him relate with the untouchables in India.

Heart and Head: Speeches and Writings on Untouchability

If the body of relevant literature is searched during twentieth century India, Gandhiji may stand out one of the very few distinct persons who have written hundreds of pages about untouchability and untouchables in the country. A further significant and distinctive aspect is that Gandhiji also worked all his life for removal of untouchability and betterment of untouchables' socio-economic condition. Admittedly, it will not be possible to produce in this book what all Gandhiji has written, but some relevant and selected portions of his writings have been discussed and quoted.

One of his early writings on untouchable communities appeared in *Indian Opinion*, a journal which he edited and published in South Africa. In a lecture on 'Hinduism' delivered under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, Johannesburg in March 1905, Gandhiji said that majority of the converts to Islam came from the lower Hindu classes. The statement created a stir among the Muslims in South Africa. Many letters of protest were written to the Editor of the *Indian Opinion* and one of them was published. Gandhiji responded to the letter by one Mr Vavada. The response was published in the *Indian Opinion* Issue of May 20, 1905. Gandhiji wrote that at personal level he did not make any distinction between a Brahmin and a scavenger (original word is changed). He considered it a merit of Islam that

128. The original word has been replaced

129. *Ibid* p 47

those that were dissatisfied with the social distinction in Hinduism were able to better their condition by embracing Islam.¹³⁰

In the issue of May 11, 1907. Gandhiji made a reference to untouchability when he discussed the issue of Indians requiring permits to move on roads in the night in Transvaal. He wrote,

But the law in question seeks physically to bring compulsion to bear on our persons. Just as in India some of us oppress the *bhangis* and force them to dress in some particular fashion and use obsequious language lest we be polluted by their proximity [sic], it has fallen to our lot to be treated like *bhangis* here in the Transvaal. To remind us perpetually of this status, we are to be obliged to carry permits on our persons.¹³¹

In the Issue of April 23, 1910 of *Indian Opinion* Gandhiji discussed the news that Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaikwad of Baroda State had opened up school admissions for children of untouchable families. Report also said that some Hindus from high castes protested and were creating hurdles. Gandhiji in his writing said that the South Africa based Hindus of high castes should draw a lesson and they should not treat the untouchables with contempt when they returned to India.¹³²

After his return to India, Gandhiji attended first major political conference in Gujarat at Godhra on November 3, 1917. He was invited to preside over the Conference and deliver the Presidential Address. In Godhra the political conference was followed by Social and *Antyaja*¹³³ conferences. He also wrote an article after the conferences got over and it was published originally in Hindi. He emphasised that unless fusion takes place between Hindus, Muslims and untouchables, Indians won't be fit to achieve *Swaraj*. In the article he emphasised the following:

That the untouchables are a separate class is a blot on India's forehead. The caste system is a hindrance, not a sin. But untouchability is a sin, a great crime, and if Hinduism does not destroy this serpent while there is yet time, it will be devoured by it.¹³⁴

After the Godhra conferences Gandhiji spoke on the subject in umpteen meetings and many of them were published. Gandhiji preferred to have his own journals that could carry his thoughts and others could join

130. CWMG Volume 4, p 430

131. CWMG Volume 6, p 470

132. CWMG Volume 10, p 228

133. The meaning of the word *Antyaja* has been explained earlier. In Gujarat during those times the word was used to indicate the untouchables.

134. CWMG Volume 14, p 73



the debates. In the early period in India *Navajivan* was one such periodical that he edited and published in Gujarati. *Young India* was another that was published in English.

The address he gave in Godhra on April 21, 1921 was published in *Navajivan*. He told the Godhra Municipality that it should gird up its loins to remove untouchability. He said that he was aghast to see the condition of quarters of untouchables and the municipality needed to take immediate action to clean up the location.¹³⁵ In July 17, 1921 issue of *Navajivan* Gandhiji tackled an interesting question which was in those days commonly raised. ‘If the untouchables went for education, who would do their work?’ Gandhiji wrote that it was the mind-set that was responsible for the question. Education and profession were wrongly linked. If after education the scavenging community members gave up their work we should be happy about it and everybody should start scavenging and maintaining their own toilets. We surely appear rather uneducated in the matter of knowing laws of sanitation and hygiene in the way we use and maintain our toilets and bathrooms.¹³⁶

A letter from one Vasantram Shastri published in *Navajivan* issue of July 17, 1921 led to a debate. Gandhiji added an editorial note to the article in which he said that he had used strong language against untouchability as it was practiced and that the untouchability was inspired by malevolence. In response many letters had come to *Navajivan* and Gandhiji comprehensively responded to them in the issue of August 21, in an article titled ‘Untouchability’. Gandhiji wrote that he was happy to note the tenor of discussion as people had started questioning the relevance of what was practiced in the name of religion. Gandhiji noted that the issue did belong to religion and its proper understanding. He then wrote that he had been practicing and advocating abolition of untouchability from correct religious perspective.¹³⁷

On August 31, 1924 Gandhiji made a long speech at a meeting in Excelsior Theatre, Bombay later published in *Navajivan* on September 7, 1924. He brought up the issue of untouchables in the context of Khadi. Traditionally weaving communities in most part of the country were untouchables. His passion in the speech and sentiments towards the untouchables and his commitment towards removal of untouchability were unmistakable:

135. CWMG Volume 20, p 9

136. *Ibid* p 392

137. CWMG Volume 21, p 1-3

I am convinced that the sole cause for your love for me is that I have identified myself with the poor. I can become a (Dalit) in the company of a (Dalit)¹³⁸ and I can do the work of a (Dalit) along with a (Dalit). If untouchability is not eradicated during my lifetime and if I am to take another birth, I wish to be born a (Dalit). If untouchability persists and if I have the strength to abandon the Hindu religion, I shall read *Kalma* or become a Christian. I have, however, such great faith in my religion that I must live and die in it. For this reason also, I would wish to be born a (Dalit) were I to be re-born.¹³⁹

It has been argued that Gandhiji's position with respect to caste system or *Varnashrama*¹⁴⁰ was ambiguous. More than being ambiguous, his position was complex. Erikson notes, 'another complex issue that of caste was taken up by Gandhi with utmost honesty and vigor'.¹⁴¹ In October 1916 issue of a Marathi Magazine *Bharat Sevak* Gandhiji published an article titled 'The Hindu Caste System'.¹⁴² In the article he said that caste system in India was a perfectly natural institution with a religious meaning. He was opposed to the movements that were being carried out in those times for destruction of the caste system. However, he was certainly in favour of removing any defects in the system. He took a peculiar stand on inter-dining and inter-caste marriages. In 1916, he said that the process of eating was as unclean as evacuation and hence as far as possible should be done in private. Similarly, if a boy did not find a girl within the caste, and if the person was inclined to go to vicious ways, the boy should get married to a girl from any other caste. For doing such an act he should not be expelled from the caste. His entitlement to enjoy the other benefits of being in a caste should not be taken away. The ideal solution that Gandhiji recommended was to stay unmarried and practice *brahmacharya*. Erikson says Gandhiji in this sense was not for equality in principle if it amounted to libertarianism, he was for self-control. In that sense eating or not eating with an untouchable for him was none of community's business but a personal decision and control on self.

138. Original words have been replaced.

139. CWMG Volume 25, p 60

140. Gandhiji made clear distinction between caste system as practiced in society and *Varnashrama* which according to him was based on economic classification maintaining equality of all in different *varnas*. By this logic he rejected any religious basis for untouchability.

141. Erikson Erik H. 1970. *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*. Issued by W.W. Norton & co. 1993, pp288-89

142. CWMG Volume 13, pp 301-03



On December 27, 1924 Gandhiji rendered a speech in Untouchability Conference in Belgaum. He began by saying that he believed in *Varnashrama* both as per birth and karma but did not consider untouchables were of low order. If he was unable to gain moksha he would wish to be reborn as an untouchable. Elaborating his position Gandhiji said,

Let me make my position absolutely clear. While I do hold that the institution of untouchability as it stands today has no sanction in Hinduism, Hinduism does recognize "untouchability" in a limited sense and under certain circumstances. For instance, every time that my mother handled unclean things she became untouchable for the time being and had to cleanse herself by bathing. As a *Vaishnava* I refuse to believe that anyone can be regarded untouchable by reason of his or her birth,... and such untouchability as is recognized by religion is by its very nature transitory, easily removable and referable to the deed not the doer.¹⁴³

Thus Gandhiji tried to change the understanding of untouchability. If the society condemned the sanitary and hygiene workers to a low order caste, it was a gross mistake. No wonder, that consistent with his understanding he suggested that everybody should become an ideal sanitary worker. He was a good practicing sanitary worker. The other concomitant restrictions such as inter-dining and inter-marriage stood null and void. Untouchability was not a caste. He had different logic for restriction on inter-dining and inter-marriages. In the Conference making reference to it he said,

Now another point, I do not regard inter-dining and intermarriage as essential to the removal of untouchability. I believe in *varnashrama* dharma. But I eat with *Bhangis* (untouchables)....I am moving deliberately in the direction of *sanyasa*. It is, therefore, not only not necessary for me to observe these restrictions but their observance may be even harmful for me. As regards the question of intermarriage, it does not arise in cases like mine. Sufficient for me to say that my scheme does not include intermarriage.¹⁴⁴

The ambiguity appears here. Was Gandhiji a conservative? His actions defied. Yet it is true that on the issue of caste system he continued to hold the opinion expressed above. But in practice he never imposed any restriction on inter-dining. How could he justify his belief and his practice? In January 1925 in the opening speech of the Kathiawar Political Conference he admitted that his parents believed in untouchability and he did not and that too from his childhood. He revered his parents who had taught him the

143. CWMG Volume 25, p 512

144. *Ibid* p 512

lessons of freedom too. But he did not follow them blindly. He also freed himself from following the *Varnashrama* rules and restrictions relating to inter-dining and inter-marriages. On what gave him such freedom, he said,

I like the path of service; therefore, I like the (Dalit). I have personally no objection to sharing my meal with him, but I am not asking you to inter-dine with or inter-marry him. How can I advise you? As far as I am concerned I am a fakir, who has given up the world, a sanyasi who is not bound by social customs,...¹⁴⁵

Gandhiji continued to speak and write for removal of untouchability. He also did not miss any opportunity to address the untouchable communities and persuade them to give up liquor, squalor and other insanitary practices. 1932 was a watershed year in Gandhiji's work among untouchables. It is reviewed in next section.

Hand and Head Together: Action and Thought

Action for removal of untouchability was indeed very tough for Gandhiji at family as well as society level. But he tried hard with rare passion and commitment. The trial began at home. First resistance came from his wife Kasturba. A well-known incident that reflected deeply ingrained preconception in the mind of Kasturba. It happened off shore in South Africa when Gandhiji was a practicing Barrister and a householder. Gandhiji lived in a big house that was built after Western Design. Besides the immediate family, the office staff also lived in the same building. Toilets attached to bedrooms were still not in vogue. A utensil known as Chamber Pot was kept in every room for passing urine. A family member or a cleaner had to empty it every morning and clean it. Kasturba, the lady of the house shared most of the household chores. However, she was reluctant to clean the chamber pot of a new boarder, Panchama, originally from the family of untouchables. The young barrister Gandhi who was revolutionising his life and that of his family and associates was yet to give up his male dominance completely. The high tempered tyrant of those days ill-treated Kasturba, only to repent later and learn a lesson of lifetime. But the point remains that Kasturba's behaviour in this incident was not out of any violent hatred for the person in case, but it was cultural inhibition that was rooted deep.¹⁴⁶

145. *Ibid* p 567

146. Gandhiji narrated the incident in his *Autobiography*. There is a sense of deep repentance about the way he behaved on that day. Interestingly, almost most of Gandhi biographers have quoted the dialogue verbatim from the *Autobiography*. Such was the true reconstruction of the event and frank admission of his unacceptable behaviour. Reader may benefit reading it. Gandhi, M.K. *Autobiography, Op.cit.* p 207-8



Cultural grounding of caste system was deep among Gandhiji's kith and kin who lived with him in South Africa. Staying, touching and inter-dining with untouchables were anathema for them. The point is being belaboured because in Phoenix Ashram and Tolstoy Farm Maganlal Gandhi was 'Mr Sanitation' for the family. He handled human excreta day in and day out and also trained cousins and nephews especially Devdas Gandhi¹⁴⁷ and Prabhudas Gandhi. Yet a major crisis emerged in 1915 in the Kochrab Ashram, Ahmedabad when Gandhiji decided to accept an untouchable family as Ashram inmate. The case of Dudabhai is also very well discussed in the literature.

Amritlal Thakkar who worked with untouchables and later with tribal communities for their socio-economic betterment and known as Thakkar Bapa, wrote to Gandhiji to the effect that a humble and honest family was desirous of joining the Ashram. Gandhiji in the *Autobiography* noted that he was perturbed because he never expected that an untouchable family would seek admission in the Ashram. Request came with an introduction from Thakkar Bapa. Gandhiji shared the letter with his companions and they welcomed it. He then answered that if the person and his family were willing to follow the rules and discipline of the Ashram, they were welcome. So Dudabhai and his family arrived. This caused a stir. First reaction came from the person who was in-charge of the house in which the Ashram was located. When Dudabhai and his family members started drawing water from the well, the in-charge abused and molested Dudabhai. Gandhiji instructed the inmates not to give any reaction and put up with the nuisance. Soon, the in-charge was ashamed and he stopped hurling curses and settled with the situation. However, benefactors providing financial support to Ashram did not take kindly. Not only they discontinued monetary contribution, they also talked about social boycott. Gandhiji told his companions that if no help came he planned to shift to the untouchables' neighbourhood in Kochrab village and live there. In a miraculous way, without any appeal or request, a person visited the Ashram one evening, did not come in but called Gandhiji out and said that if Gandhiji was willing to accept help he would come next morning at ten. Gandhiji obviously was very happy to receive the help. Next morning the car arrived at the appointed hour. The person was Ambalal Sarabhai, the rich mill owner. He gave a purse of -- 13,000 and left. The money problem was solved. Something more serious waited in the store.

147. Gandhiji's fourth son.

Gandhiji had noted that as there was storm outside, so was there a storm in the Ashram itself. Maganlal Gandhi's wife Santokben protested by hunger strike. Maganlal and Kasturba also had reservations. The argument was that in South Africa it was not a problem as it was a foreign country and they did not live among their family and community. Here the pressure from community and society would be high. It appears that Santokben had objection to live with the untouchable family because their community would outcaste Gandhis. Thus, the issue was not of being defiled by the touch, but rejection by the caste community. Gandhiji was pained but he remained firm and frank. The Ashram aims were clear. The very first one was about removing untouchability. It would imply living with them as well.

It was indeed difficult to administer the Ashram without Maganlal. However, if the couple had reservation over Dudabhai and his family staying in Ashram, they would have to go. Fortunately, a solution was worked out. Maganlal wanted to learn leather work. The couple was sent to Madras for six months. The reservations of Santokben disappeared by close contact with the untouchables. With great pain Gandhiji told Kasturba to leave if she wished and he would send her financial help. Kasturba decided to stay. Later, Gandhiji and Kasturba adopted the little daughter Laxmi of Dudabhai and Daniben. In the Belgaum Conference for untouchables in 1924, Gandhiji told the gathering the following:

I have adopted an untouchable child as my own. I confess I have not been able to convert my wife completely to my view. She cannot bring herself to love her as I do. But I cannot convert my wife by anger; I can do so only by love.¹⁴⁸

The apparent ambiguity that Gandhiji carried with him about believing in *Varnashrama* and his determination to remove untouchability generated questions. Erikson provided an explanation that is worth visiting. He tried to explain thus,

...in spite of all the complexity of his point of view, he would not hesitate, on settling down by the Sabarmati, to commit the totally revolutionary act of admitting an Untouchable family to his ashram. In all issues then, he took only such exemplary actions as he could initiate with a sure sense that he could and he would take care of the consequences.¹⁴⁹

The situation in 1915 in the Indian society in general and high caste Gujaratis in particular continued to harbour deep prejudices against

148. CWMG Volume 25, p 514

149. Erikson. *Op.cit.* p 289



untouchables and contact with them was a taboo. Gandhiji realised that he had an uphill task to move towards the first aim of Satyagraha Ashram of uplifting the untouchables. But this did not deter him. When the premises of the Ashram were moved to Sabarmati, cloth weaving was initiated. Spinning, weaving and footwear making also began. Maganlal Gandhi had been to Madras and worked with leather workers to become skilled in the trade. In the process he and his wife got rid of their prejudices against the untouchables as they lived and worked among them!¹⁵⁰ Interestingly, as will be described later, Gandhiji in consultation with all other trustees of the Ashram handed over the Satyagraha Ashram to Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1933.¹⁵¹

Gandhiji influenced Congress to resolve to work for removing untouchability from the country. In 1924 a major programme was planned in Travancore in Madras Presidency then and in the present Kerala State. Gandhiji noted in *Navajivan* issue of April 6, 1924, 'As if the sin of untouchability was not enough, we started another sinful practice, that of unapproachability, to add to the burden.'¹⁵² In the same issue, Gandhiji noted that in the North the situation with respect to untouchability was improving significantly under the leadership of Pandit Madanmohan Malaviya. The *Antyajias* were being allowed to draw water from wells used by other Hindus. The notion of being defiled by their touch was seemingly dying out in many places.

Kerala Provincial Congress Committee resolved to support action programmes to open up the public roads for untouchables. As part of it, the Congress workers and others decided to take a procession on the unapproachable road around the temple in Vykam in Travancore State on March 30, 1924. They were stopped by the temple staff and the police at the point from where the untouchables were not allowed. Satyagrahis stood there peacefully and chanted prayers and sang Bhajans. The protest was so disciplined that the authorities also appreciated it. At some distance a temporary camp was set up where the Satyagrahis waited for their turn

150. Prabhudas Gandhi whose work has been referred to in chapter 2, has noted that when he was learning the leather work in the Ashram from traditional leather workers, his aunt Santokben did not have any problem, but she would invariably suggest a bath before eating after Prabhudas came to the quarters. But Maganlal would dismiss referring to the Madras days and soon Santokben also realised its futility and the prejudice disappeared completely.

151. Nayar Sushila, 1996. *Mahatma Gandhi Volume VII, Preparing for Swaraj*. Navajivan Publishing House Ahmedabad, p 165-66.

152. CWMG Volume 23, p 386

to walk to the road, offer resistance at the spot, sing and get arrested. It was completely a nonviolent Satyagraha; characterised by truthfulness of the issue and preparedness on part of Satyagrahis to undergo suffering. In the issue of February 5, 1925, Gandhiji framed some questions on untouchability and its removal in an article. It was like present day FAQs with answers! He came out with full clarity on issues and taken a position. Answering a question whether there was some supreme philosophy that could be understood only by the elitist of the elite, Gandhiji replied,

Not much "supreme philosophical truth" is involved in the recognition of the simple truth that no human being is to be regarded as untouchable by reason of his birth. The truth is so simple that it is recognized all over the world except by orthodox Hindus. I have questioned the statement that the rishis taught the doctrine of untouchability as we practise it.¹⁵³

Gandhiji spent about a month in Travancore in 1925. On March 10, 1925, he argued forcefully in a public meeting in Vythiri that untouchability and unapproachability had no support of scriptures. People in Vythiri had taken correct stand to protest and get the roads open for untouchables. Vythiri Satyagraha was one of the long drawn Satyagrahas. It took more than 14 months for the Travancore government to open the roads around the temple. The impact was felt all over India resulting in opening of temple doors to untouchables in many places. Travancore became the first state in India to open all its temples to untouchables. The first temple to be opened to the oppressed class was the Radha Krishna Temple in Wardha in August 1928 that was built by the elders of Jamnalal Bajaj, who was a known benefactor of Gandhiji. Gandhiji had taken him as his fifth son.

Poona Pact and After

The Poona Pact was the result of Gandhiji's fast unto death that he undertook on September 20, 1932 while he was in Yeravda Jail. The British, had under a new constitution for India's governance, issued a Communal Award. It specified separate elections for Hindus, Moslems, and other groups. The provision for untouchables was to vote in the Hindu elections but they were also to vote separately for their own representatives. Dr. Ambedkar, a renowned leader and representative of the oppressed classes, won the provision with his commitment, passion and hard work. He was clearly seeking political space for his community against the oppressions of the caste Hindus. Orthodox Hindu groups opposed separate voting for untouchables. Gandhiji was intensely opposed too, but for a very different

153. CWMG Volume 26, p 67



reason. He wanted to obliterate the line between the untouchables and the rest of the Hindus. He did not want 'Uka' to be separated forever from him, but wanted to embrace him with all love and no prejudice. Gandhiji was passionate about this, he had flared up on Kasturba for not cleaning the chamber pot of the Panchama in South Africa and in Kochrab he had told Kasturba, Maganlal and Santokben to leave the Ashram if they felt so acutely about Dudabhai and his family living with them. It was passion, dedication and work that made him take a historical decision to 'fast unto death' in protest to the British announcement of the new Communal Award providing separate voting. He categorically admitted that political Swaraj with untouchability was not Swaraj for him. He was deeply interested in sanitation because in his idea of Swaraj the civic society had to be clean and hygienic. At the same time his idea of Swaraj also meant a sane society in which liberty, equality, justice and fraternity were paramount values.

Gandhiji's Fast unto Death metamorphosed the mind-set in the country. It was 16 years since he started working in public life in India. He was charismatic. Rabindranath Tagore called him 'Mahatma'. As an individual, he showed exceptional commitment to removal of untouchability. An American reporter, Louis Fischer¹⁵⁴ met Gandhiji in Wardha and spent a week, reasoned the necessity of 'Mahatma's Torment'. According to him, Gandhiji's relationship with the Indian people was not based on logic and legalism – the instrument with which Ambedkar had embarked his struggle. The fast was announced on September 13, 1932, good eight days before Gandhiji was to commence it. He had amazing emotional appeal. Fischer has analysed that Gandhiji made each Hindu personally responsible for his life. Fischer noted that the electrifying effect also came because of Gandhiji's statement to the press on 15 September which was widely disseminated. Gandhiji had said,

No Patched-up agreement between Caste Hindus and rival Depressed Class leaders will answer the purpose. The agreement to be valid has to be real. If the Hindu mind is not yet prepared to banish untouchability root and branch it must sacrifice me without the slightest hesitation.¹⁵⁵

Fischer further notes that the large Hindu community experienced religious-emotional upheaval. In the beginning of the 'fast week' the famous Kalighat Temple of Kolkata and the Ram Mandir of Benares, the citadel of Hindu orthodoxy, were thrown open to untouchables. In number 154. Well-known for his biography on Gandhiji

155. Louis Fischer, 1950. "Was the Mahatma's Torment Unnecessary?" Reprinted in Homar A Jack. (Editor) 1956. *The Gandhi Reader*; Grove Press New York p 294.

of cities and towns the temples were opened for them. Temples in the native states of Baroda, Kashmir, and Kolhapur cancelled temple discrimination. The newspapers had printed the names of the hundreds of temples that had lowered the bars under the impact of Gandhiji's fast. Anandshankar Dhruv, the then Vice Chancellor of the Benares Hindu University and resident of Ahmedabad who had arbitrated in the Mill Workers' strike, partook with other high caste people meals with untouchables.

Thus, it was an emotive issue for people and Gandhiji. It was so also for Ambedkar. A brief dialogue given in the earlier section makes it evident. Ambedkar welcomed the British proposition. He had sought political space and through that space he wanted to empower the oppressed communities. Gandhiji wanted the oppressors to embrace these communities with love as equals and eradicate the distinction of condemned and untouchable class by birth. Sanitation work for him was temporary pollution which could be removed with good and hygienic cleaning as in the case of mother attending the child while cleaning it of urine and excreta. The two stalwarts thus took opposing views and none wanted to give up or move towards any compromise. Sushila Nayar referring to Pyarelal's *The Epic Fast* has described Gandhiji's position on why he opposed the British proposition – the Communal Award, and what and how he felt about untouchability.¹⁵⁶ On the first day of the fast Gandhiji addressed the Press. He said that he was only against separate electorate, and not against statutory reservation of seats. He said that he was untouchable by choice and wanted to represent lowest among them. He further said,

I have met them in Malabar and in Orissa, and am convinced that if they are ever to rise, it will not be by reservation of seats but will be by the strenuous work of Hindu reformers in their midst, ... and, let me make it plain, that the withdrawal of separate electorates will satisfy the letter of my vow but will never satisfy the spirit behind it, and in my capacity of being a self-chosen untouchable, I am not going to rest content with a patched-up pact between the 'touchables' and the untouchables. What I want, what I am living for, and what I should delight in dying for, is the eradication of untouchability root and branch....My life I count of no consequence. One hundred lives given for this noble cause would, in my opinion, be poor penance done by Hindus for the atrocious wrongs they have heaped upon helpless men and women of their own faith. I, therefore, would urge them not to swerve an inch from the path of strictest justice. My fast I want to throw in the scales of justice, and if it wakes up

156. Sushila Nayar *op.cit.* p 66-67



caste Hindus from their slumber, and if they are roused to a sense of their duty, it will have served its purpose.¹⁵⁷

As consequence of the Fast, action began on two fronts. One was initiation of dialogue between representative Hindu leaders and Ambedkar and his team to work out solution for the depressed class outside the Communal Award. A conference began on September 19 i.e., before the beginning of the fast.¹⁵⁸ Everyone from both the groups was primarily concerned about Gandhiji's life. The intent here is not to go into the process of negotiations that went on between them. Suffice is to say that Ambedkar fought inch by inch to get his point home and he had a couple of sessions with Gandhiji too. Finally, both Ambedkar and Gandhiji poured out their hearts and gave vent to their feelings. Gandhiji finally said the famous sentence, "There you are. Five years or my life."¹⁵⁹ The agreement arrived at between the Hindus and Ambedkar and team representing depressed class with mediation of Gandhiji came to be known as the 'Poona Pact'. It was immediately sent to the British Government. Based on the Pact, amendment to the Communal Award was made and issued. On September 26, 1932 after receiving communication from the Government of India, Gandhiji broke the fast by accepting orange juice.

Efforts from the Yeravda Jail

Action at second level was more phenomenal. Sushila Nayar has noted that Gandhiji's fast, throughout the country, led to an unleashing of such a mighty torrent of anti-untouchability sentiment that for a time it seemed to sweep aside all other questions from the public mind. Hindu conscience was stirred. A huge meeting was held in Mumbai in the Cowasji Jehangir Hall on September 29, 1932 and an All-India Anti-Untouchability League, with its headquarters in Delhi and branches all over the country, was set up. In December 1932 the League was renamed as Harijan Sevak Sangh. Following two tasks were taken up on priority for action.

- All public wells, Dharamshalas, roads, schools, crematoriums, burning-ghats, etc., be declared open to the depressed classes.
- All public temples be opened to members of the depressed classes.

There were numerous communities in the country that were untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar and others who worked for their betterment

157. For the Excerpt and for full speech refer CWMG Volume 51, p 116-20

158. The fast was announced before it was assumed. The news had travelled like wild fire and as a consequence efforts began to find a way out.

159. Sushila Nayar, *op.cit.* p 79.

and the government in all official papers called the communities together as oppressed classes. However, Gandhiji coined a new word 'Harijan' for all of them. The exact time of connotation of the word is not known. However, in the issue of *Harijan Sevak* of Harijan Sevak Sangh of February 23, 1933 he wrote an article titled *Why 'Harijan'?*¹⁶⁰

Many people have asked me why I have used the name 'Harijans' for people whom we commit the sin of regarding as untouchables. Years ago a Kathiawadi *Antyaja* had written to me that names like *Antyaja*, *achhoot*, *asprishya* hurt his community. I could appreciate their feelings. For me they were neither *Antyajas* nor untouchables. It was this correspondent who had pointed out to me that the poet-devotee Narasinh Mehta in one of his *bhajans* had referred to the *Antyajas* as 'Harijans'.... I liked the name 'Harijan' immensely. 'Harijan' means a devotee of God, beloved of God.

Important to note is that Gandhiji did not find the name. It was suggested from the letter writer belonging to untouchable community who did not like the names that were in vogue during the times. Dr. Ambedkar argued systematically as to why he did not like the name Harijan. It was once again a special pointer. He frankly admitted that he also could not find an agreeable name. He was alright with oppressed class, and later when the Constitution was drafted after Independence all such communities were listed in a Schedule and hence they came to be known as members of Scheduled Castes (SC). Others also questioned the name Harijan. Gandhiji again explained in December 1933. He said,

The name Harijan was suggested by one of your class. Thousands have welcomed.... So long as untouchability is not completely removed, a name to distinguish you from others will be required, and an inoffensive name is any day better than that stinks in the nostrils.¹⁶¹

Gandhiji decided to address the members of oppressed communities as Harijans. He also used it to name the journals that were published. Gandhiji's vehicle for communication with masses was his periodicals in three languages English, Hindi and Gujarati. In 1931 *Young India* and *Navajivan* was discontinued. A new publication was in order and Gandhiji decided that it has to have name that symbolised his life effort. Hence when Harijan Sevak Sangh was formed Gandhiji advised that the house periodical should be named *Harijan*. The first issue of English *Harijan* accordingly came out from Poona on February 11, 1933. R.V. Shastri was the editor. The Hindi version of the journal, *Hindi Sevak*, was published from Delhi

160. Interested readers may access the article in CWMG Volume 53, p 374-6

161. Sushila Nayar *Op.cit.* p 175



on February 23, 1933. The editor was a well-known poet and a person representing the oppressed class, Viyogi Hari. The last to follow was the Gujarati journal *Harijanbandhu* which was edited by Chandrashankar Shukla and the first issue was published on March 12, 1933 from Poona. Soon it was shifted to Ahmedabad. In the first issue of *Harijanbandhu* Gandhiji wrote,

I am not eager to die. I am eager to live and commit untouchability to the flames. And If I have to die in order to see that glorious hour, I am ready to die.... To live with untouchability is like a cup of poison to me.¹⁶²

Gandhiji intensified his efforts for Harijan cause soon after the Government had issued the revised Award. But the British Government suddenly withdrew all the facilities that were extended to him in the Yeravda Prison. Gandhiji wanted office facility, a secretary to undertake correspondence and handle other things, concession to write and speak to people via Press, and importantly to meet people in jail. The jail authorities did not yield. Gandhiji once again went on fast demanding requisite arrangements that were to facilitate his work of removal of untouchability. The Vice Regal's office realised the importance of Gandhiji's work and ordered the jail authorities to relax most restrictions. Gandhiji's days then onward became very hectic. It is recorded that between November 4 and December 30, Gandhiji drafted 13 statements for the press and wrote dozens of letters to people. These statements cover in detail most issues that were raised during those times relating to Gandhiji's real intentions, response to people's beliefs, opposition, arguments, etc., response to the hard core Hindus and *Sanatanis*' diatribe and also his response to the reformers. In second such statement, Gandhiji succinctly put how the caste Hindus had maltreated the untouchables for ages,

We shall go wrong if caste men regard themselves as patrons distributing favours to the Harijans. Whatever is done now by the caste Hindus for the Harijans will be but tardy reparation for the wrongs done to them for generations, and if now they have to be received in their existing state, as they must be received, it is a well-deserved punishment for the past guilt.... It is well to remind ourselves of what wrongs we have heaped upon the devoted heads of the Harijans. Socially they are lepers. Economically they are worse than slaves. Religiously they are denied entrance to places we miscall 'houses of God'. They are denied the use, on the same terms as the caste men, of public roads, public schools, public hospitals, public wells, public taps, public parks and the like, and

162. *Ibid* p 107

in some cases their approach within a measured distance is a social crime, and in some other rare enough cases their very sight is an offence. They are relegated for their residence to the worst quarters of cities or villages where they practically get no social services.... The wonder is that they are at all able to eke out an existence or that they still remain within the Hindu fold. They are too downtrodden to rise in revolt against their suppressors.¹⁶³

In the third statement, he discussed in detail purity of means. A correspondent wrote to him that people had been aggressive and perhaps violent in undertaking things and some who were perturbed over Gandhiji's fast and his life perceived to be in danger had resorted to coercion in some cases. Gandhiji firmly stated that no violence and coercion of any kind should happen. The only force was love. The purpose of embracing with love would stand defeated if any coercion was used.

In the fifth statement Gandhiji discussed internal reforms for the oppressed communities. His suggestion and appeal were to promote cleanliness in their localities, and giving up flesh eating and liquor consumption. He also appealed that they should send their children for education and remove untouchability within.¹⁶⁴ He asked all the Harijan workers to work seriously for innovations and improvements in scavenging and tanning.¹⁶⁵ His appeals continued in his subsequent statements. But by the end of December 1932, he realised that the fervour and enthusiasm has waned among Caste Hindus. In certain cases the steps such as temple entry were reversed. Harijans mounted pressure by complaining that the caste Hindus were not responding on the ground. The so called *Sanatanis* or hard core Hindus mounted fresh attacks on Gandhi. Both sides questioned the Poona Pact. People in Bengal felt they were short changed politically. They did not get the deserved number of seats in the Assembly and Council. Even Rabindranath Tagore wrote a letter to Gandhiji on the subject agreeing with the Bengal representation. All this prompted Gandhiji to go through serious introspection and he declared fast of 21 days. Writing to the Government, he categorically said that the reasons for fast were wholly unconnected with

163. CWMG Volume 51, p 346-7

164. Caste hierarchy and untouchability also prevailed among oppressed communities.

165. It is rather unfortunate that manual scavenging still obtains in the country although the extent may be very limited, but it is there. The 2016 Magsaysay Awardee from India is Bezwada Wilson for working for manual scavenging. According to his estimate there are still about 200,000 manual scavengers in the country (*Hindustan Times* Dated July 28 2016). It is shameful and most unfortunate to say the least.



Government and solely connected with the Harijan Movement.¹⁶⁶ Gandhiji had sprung surprise on all, even on his close associates. The fast was for self-purification. Purity of means in the proposed work was being compromised and Gandhiji appealed to all such people who were unable to work with purity of means to leave the cause alone.

Harijan Tour

Removal of untouchability and betterment of Harijans in the country was the work most close to his heart in the years to follow. The first Harijan Tour began on November 7, 1933. However, before that he accomplished one more work revealing his dedication to the Harijan cause. Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmati, Ahmedabad had been dissolved formally on July 31, 1933. He wrote to the Government to take over. Since the Government declined to do so, Gandhiji consulted the trustees and suggested that it should be handed over to Harijan Sevak Sangh for the furtherance of the work of Harijan welfare. The suggestion was accepted and it was resolved to entrust the Ashram to Harijan Sevak Sangh. Gandhiji refused to be involved in its management. He suggested that full responsibility should be borne by Thakkar Bapa. However, after sometime Harijan Sevak Sangh shifted its headquarters to Delhi, but the Sabarmati Ashram became Harijan Ashram.

Gandhiji had immense inner strength and eclectic appeal. The tour therefore gave him a good boost. In about 12 days tour in Maharashtra no less than 150,000 people came to all the meetings. From Maharashtra he moved on to Central Provinces and then to Delhi. The road conditions of those days were not like they are today. Similarly, the motor cars that were available also had moderate speeding capacity. In view of the above, Gandhiji had been on a whirlwind tour. He visited dozens of towns and villages covering at times more than five locations a day. The day normally began for him at 3 a.m. He would uninterruptedly write letters until 6 a.m. Then the travel and meetings would follow. In the tour he also visited Harijan quarters. His assessment was quite scientific. In an article sent to *Harijan* on his visit to Anantpur, a small village in Sagar district in present day Madhya Pradesh, Gandhiji presented it like a detailed village study. The article began,

Anantpur is a little village in Saugor District, C. P. (Hindi), containing 177 houses with a population, therefore, roughly of 885. It is 35 miles

166. For details refer Sushila Nayar *Op.cit.* p 112-13

from the nearest railway station. It has no Post or Telegraph Office. There is a weekly service from the nearest Post Office, Relly, 12 miles from Anantpur. It is a typically poor village of poor India. The villagers are occupied not more than four months in the year. There was hardly any supplementary occupation for the villagers as a whole before an event that happened four years ago.¹⁶⁷

Gandhiji then gave his observations about the status of the village. The village was inhabited entirely by untouchables. He found Harijan family houses bare of any metal pots or boxes. The inmates were in rags. Their bedding was straw covered with rags. The diet was normally *Jowar* millet and a pulse. Children were stark naked. The sun by day and fire by night kept them warm. Was the case hopeless then in terms of their betterment? The question indeed was there. But there was hope too. A worker Jethalal Govindji, whose faith in Khadi rivalled that of Gandhiji, provided the hope. He settled there in 1929. He conducted a full census which collected information about every household. He had been working with single-minded devotion and teaching the villagers the skills of ginning, carding, spinning, weaving and dyeing. His work was spread in 17 villages covering 1100 households. During those times economic betterment could be done through Khadi work as demonstrated by Jethalal.

The second stage of the tour began on December 14 with Gandhiji and his team leaving for Bezwada in Andhra Pradesh by train. This stage covered a large part of South India. On December 17, 1933, at a place called Siddhantam, Special Correspondent of *The Hindu* questioned Gandhiji as to what he thought of the statement of a reformist M.K. Acharya of Madras that 95 per cent of Harijans did not want the Gandhian 'creed'. It should be noted that Gandhiji was questioned by the Sanatanis on one side who wanted to maintain the status quo, and on the other by the reformist who were fighting for political space and empowerment. Gandhiji's reply was:

I do not know what 'the Gandhian creed' is. If I do not know it, how do the Harijans know it or Mr Acharya himself?.... I know only this. I am engaged in giving Harijans clean water.... facilities for education.... finding accommodation for them in public caravan serais... in weaning them from drink and carrion.... in teaching them the elementary rules of hygiene. Do they not want it? I am engaged in telling them what the fundamentals of Hinduism are and in having public temples thrown open to them. Mark the distinction.... Whenever they find temples are thrown open to them, they are simply delirious with joy, as I found them

167. CWMG Volume 56, pp 333-6



to be today when I opened two temples and entered them with them. I do not care whether they want to go to the temples or no. I simply feel that savarnas should do their duty. There is nothing 'Gandhian' about it. Every Hindu who believes that untouchability must go must understand this work.¹⁶⁸

Gandhiji spent three days in Madras and attended several events. One of them was students' meeting. He motivated the students to pick up broom and bucket and clean all the dirty places in the city not by way of *tamasha*, but with conviction and commitment. He asked them to be in the Harijan settlements and reform the communities by weaning them from drink and teach them elementary principles of sanitation. At Tilak Ghat in Triplicane Beach, Madras Gandhiji saw biggest crowd ever. There were more than one lakh people. It took him half an hour to pass through the crowd and reach the dais and forty five minutes to reach his vehicle back. He admitted that it was the largest number that had gathered until then. While he appreciated that people generally turned up in very large numbers at most places he visited and felt wonderful, he had shown all humility about the influence he could create. He wrote to one of his secretaries that the numbers could be deceptive on two counts. One, the need was to reach crores of people in the country. Two, all those who came were not likely to change their behaviour overnight. He was hopeful that many would indeed change over time. Later in Bangalore (now Bengaluru) he spoke to the student community and persuaded them to join one of the biggest reform movements in the country.

Gandhiji was deeply distressed by the untouchability issue. During the Harijan tour he was immersed in action for its removal. All his senses were working for that one issue. Between November 1933 and January 1934 he traversed from Central India to north and from there to interiors of southern India. During this period, on January 22, he came to know about a devastating earthquake in Bihar. From then on, Gandhiji started speaking about both untouchability and need for relief work in Bihar in his public meetings. But to the surprise of most of his associates and the rational community in the country Gandhiji made a connection between Bihar earthquake and untouchability! On January 24, 1934 Gandhiji addressed people in Tinnevely and said that he may be called a superstitious person, but he believed that the earthquake was a Divine chastisement sent by God for our sins. On the same day he also addressed people in Tuticorin. In that

168. *Ibid* pp 345-6

meeting he came out clearly about the sin and the calamity resulting from it. He said,

I want you to be "superstitious" enough with me to believe that the earthquake is a divine chastisement for the great sin we have committed and are still committing against those whom we describe as untouchables, Panchamas, and whom I describe as Harijans.¹⁶⁹

Gandhiji made the point about superstition at many meetings and hence he had deservingly invited severe criticism from rationalist quarters. Rabindranath Tagore too was surprised and sincerely pained. He wrote a letter to be published in *Harijan*. Gandhiji offered explanation. The purpose of discussing this point in the text here is not to enter into debate about rationality, but to point out that Gandhiji instinctively connected the two knowing that he could not have proved it. He was most likely guided by his intense emotions about the problem of untouchability arising out of his regular distressing experiences on the ground during those days. For instance, he had undergone one such experience eight days before he talked about his being superstitious. It was in Trichur. He noted in the Trichur Meeting the following:

It was perhaps whilst I was driving through the streets of Trichur this morning to speak a few words to you, I saw a Nayadi in flesh and blood. He was shivering with fear. It was a sign of humiliation for you, for me, and for all Hindus.¹⁷⁰

It is very likely that Gandhiji had become very sensitive and sentimental about the problem and instinctively went public connecting the oppression of untouchables and the earthquake. Such emotional state did not deter Gandhiji from supporting relief and rehabilitation work among the earthquake affected people in Bihar.

On March 8, 1934 Gandhiji took a break from his Harijan tour to go to Bihar for earthquake relief work. All through the tour of four months he collected Rs. 3,52,130, 9 annas and 7 pice. The entire collection was called Gandhi Harijan Purse Fund. A formula for distribution over states was worked out.

In the second leg that began in April 1934 he visited Assam. A mundane but important matter bothered and irritated him. The fund collection drives involved expenses hosting Gandhiji and team, and organise public programmes. Gandhiji witnessed in Kerala an elaborate menu, and

169. CWMG Volume 57, p 46

170. *Ibid* p 3



huge amounts were spent on the event management in Assam. In *Harijan*, he commented that expenses on the felicitation addresses, uniform for volunteers and the like and debited against the purse made the reception farcical and demoralising, too. Nevertheless, he spent a total of 12 days in Assam and visited at least 25 towns and cities.

Gandhiji was back in Bihar as he wanted to tour south Bihar. During the trip he had to confront violent Sanatanists. In South too he encountered them, but there it was always a challenge to enter into debate, Bihar was different. When Gandhiji arrived in Buxar from Arrah he was greeted at the station with black flags and the crowd indulged in veritable rioting. A lathi was wielded that hit the bonnet of the car in which Miraben was travelling. Scuffle between the Sanatanists and volunteers ensued and there were broken heads on both the sides. Gandhiji then decided to walk to the meeting that was a mile away. Gandhiji walked all the way and dense crowd had gathered in line on both sides of the road and greeted him. In the meeting he said,

I am prepared to walk any distance from this place so that Sanatanists may kill me, if they like. I am alone responsible for carrying on the Harijan uplift movement and any head should be broken it ought to be mine before anybody else's.... I would gladly lay down my head on the lap of anybody who may be intent on killing me rather than give up my conviction regarding the Harijan uplift movement under threat from any quarter.¹⁷¹

Gandhiji had similar experience in Orissa where he toured in May 1934 after the Bihar trip. Sanatanists tried to be violent and aggressive. When he was approaching Puri, Sanatanists surrounded the vehicle and were wielding lathi. Gandhiji got out of the car took support of one of the lathi wielding men and started walking. The way was made for him! He then decided to walk in most of the yatras in Orissa. From Orissa, he travelled to Wardha to attend Congress meetings and then to other parts of the country. The second leg ended in Benares on August 2, 1934; he had covered Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Sindh, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. In the second leg he walked about 2000 km of which 225 km were on foot. A fund of Rupees ten lakh was collected. People's turnout was unprecedented. Women came forward to give funds more than men. He clearly identified with the cause and people believed in him fully. Hardly any other leader in the country undertook such a yatra. Hardly anyone has done after him.

171. Sushila Nayar *op.cit.* p 245

Last Leg

From 1934 onward Gandhiji was immersed into political activity and also took up most of the constructive programmes including untouchability removal. He wrote a small and neat book *Constructive Programmes* in 1941. Recognition of this task deemed essential for *Swaraj*, Gandhiji again underscored the point that the issue of untouchability was not merely a political programme. Social reform was essential to rebuild India. He was also clear that only political power would not integrate the untouchables with the main society. He ensured sustained efforts towards removal of untouchability by the volunteers who believed in his ideals. When Gandhiji introduced 'removal of untouchability' as one of the essential constructive programmes, he had already gained wide experience in undertaking the task. Poona Pact was already 9 years old. The Communal Award had been amended. Provincial elections were held in 1937; Congress won with a huge majority in most places. Ambedkar and the reformists were not able to gain much political place for which they had fought. Gandhiji's point about necessity for sustained social reform against untouchability held ground. In 1941 he wrote,

At this time of the day it is unnecessary to dilate upon the necessity of the removal of this blot and curse upon Hinduism. Congressmen have certainly done much in this matter. But I am sorry to have to say that many Congressmen looked upon this item as a mere political necessity and not something indispensable, so far as Harijans are concerned, for the very existence of Hinduism. If the Hindu Congressmen take up the cause for its own sake, they will influence the so-called *Sanatanis* far more extensively than they have hitherto done. They should approach them not in a militant spirit but, as befits their non-violence, in a spirit of friendliness. And so far as the Harijans are concerned, every Hindu should make common cause with them and befriend them in their awful isolation – such isolation as perhaps the world has never seen in the monstrous immensity one witnesses in India. I know from experience how difficult the task is. But it is a part of the task of building the edifice of *Swaraj*. And the road to *Swaraj* is steep and narrow. There are many slippery ascents and many deep chasms. They have all to be negotiated with unfaltering step before we can reach the summit and breathe the fresh air of freedom.¹⁷²

It was clear to Gandhiji that for dignified survival of Hinduism and for attaining *Swaraj* removal of untouchability was socially most vital.

172. CWMG Volume 75 p 149



In 1946 when the Independence to country appeared near, Gandhiji attended to the communal violence all over. However, in Delhi he decided to live in Harijan Colony. The reformists continued to question Congress's position on the status of the untouchables in free India. They also questioned Gandhiji. In the issue of *Harijan* of July 28, 1946 responding to the questions raised, Gandhiji categorically stated that the status of untouchables was equal to that of all communities and castes. On why he did not consider Dalits as a minority as other religious minorities he wrote,

The significance is that the untouchables are an integral part of Hindus. They are, therefore, better than minorities and worse if they claim to be and become a distinct community. A few educated untouchables may keep themselves as a class apart but the mass of them must sink or swim with the Hindus who, if they continue their misbehaviour towards Harijans-the so-called untouchables-must become extinct as a separate branch of the human family.¹⁷³

The reformists also confronted Gandhiji with the continued discrimination and practice of untouchability by caste Hindus and argued that gaining political space was the solution and hence they had a case for separate electorate. They also suggested that Harijan Sevak Sangh had failed in convincing the caste Hindus on their behaviour and that the Sangh had accepted their inability to influence. To this Gandhiji wrote,

I have made no statement, and I do not know that the Harijan Sevak Sangh has, to the effect that the removal of untouchability has made 'no headway at all'. What all of us have admitted is that removal, so far as the caste Hindus are concerned, has made no satisfactory headway.... The reform is two-sided. So far as work among the Harijans is concerned, the Sangh has made fair strides. That in itself is no small contribution to the cause of removal of untouchability.¹⁷⁴

Working for untouchability removal became important for Gandhiji during his last phase of life. He understood and conceded the uphill task of working with caste Hindus. However, bringing quality improvement in the lives of the untouchable was feasible, a work that he and the Harijan Sevak Sangh were doing with sincerity. Interestingly, a person raised a question to him about technological intervention in sanitation work. He asked whether Gandhiji considered adoption of flush system was a way to eradicate untouchability. In the context he also wanted to know whether his opposing of the machinery would come in way of such an adoption! Gandhiji's

173. CWMG Volume 85, p 19

174. *Ibid* p 21

response to the question was that wherever there was ample supply of water, modern sanitation could be introduced, he had no objection at all. It should be welcomed to improve the health of the city. He promptly added that his opposition to machinery was much misunderstood. However, he had doubts whether the flush system would remove the curse of untouchability. It would have to go from the hearts. He reiterated that for that all should become sanitation workers and do all the work done by the untouchables.

A few months after Independence, Gandhiji was trying to sooth the nerves of all those who were physically and mentally hurt in the communal clashes. He used to visit relief camps in different places in Delhi and nearby towns. He shared his agony and anguish with people in Delhi in the evening prayers at Birla House. In one such meeting Gandhiji lamented about mind-set of the caste Hindus who continued to treat the untouchables in inhuman ways. In the prayer speech on November 23, 1947 he said that his visit to Rohtak had made him realise that it was a matter of shame for all the Harijans where they were. On how the caste Hindus behave, Gandhiji said,

There are the Jats and perhaps Ahirs too. They felt that the Harijans were their slaves and they could get any work done by them. Once again the question of their rights came and they felt that the Harijans were born slaves.... The result is that the Harijans are ruined.... During the days of the British we used to abuse them and say that we would become good if the British did not rule us. Now the British have gone. But have we become good or bad? I would say that there is more degeneration now than before. We used to commit excesses and are committing them even now.¹⁷⁵

On his part, until the last days of his life he did not give up his efforts for removal of untouchability in the Indian society. He had patience to respond to a letter writer from Wadhwan in Gujarat and explain to him that temple entry issue was as much a question of right as it was of the sincerity and devotion of the visitors. One should remember that for Gandhiji all rights originated from duties and commitments. It has been shown that Gandhiji consistently suggested to the untouchables to follow sound sanitary and hygiene practices in the localities they lived.

The discussion on Gandhiji's concern and work for untouchability in this chapter is ended with a piece of information and an anecdote. First the information; in early 1930s when Gandhiji went to Ahmedabad, he inquired about the work that the Ashram people were doing for Harijan betterment. When one of the members asked how best they could do it, he asked the person if he has any child for marriage and if so, the person should look for

175. CWMG Volume 90, p 91-93



a match among the untouchable families. And indeed such a marriage was performed and Gandhiji blessed the newly married couple and declared that thereafter his blessings would not be available to any wedding couple unless one of the parties was a Harijan!¹⁷⁶

The anecdote was reported by Pyarelal. Dr. Ambedkar got married after Independence. Gandhiji was not alive. Pyarelalji remembered that once he was standing in Connaught Place waiting, a car drove by him and suddenly stopped. Ambedkar alighted from the car and handed over marriage invitation to Pyarelal and said, 'Had Bapu been alive, he would have come to bless the marriage'. Incidentally Ambedkar was getting married to a Brahmin lady!

It would also be instructive to quote part of the conversation that took place between Ambedkar and Gandhiji during the Poona Pact negotiations. The discussions between the two had been diligently recorded verbatim by Mahadev Desai. Ambedkar was presenting his view to Gandhiji who was listening intently. In the middle of the discussion Ambedkar said something that reflected his feeling towards Gandhiji and it was this.

A. But I have only one quarrel with you, that is, you work for the so called national welfare and not for our interests alone. If you devoted yourself entirely to the welfare of the Depressed Classes, you would then become our hero.

G. Very sweet of you to say so.¹⁷⁷

The mutual feelings and respect were evident.

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176. Pyarelal. *The Last Phase Book I Part I*, Navajivan Prakashan Mandir, Ahmedabad. p 60

177. CWMG Volume 51 p 458



“To me, the test of a people's knowledge of sanitation is the condition of their latrines”.



‘Turning the Searchlight Inward’

Putlibai had saintly disposition according to her son Mohandas. She was deeply religious. But she was not communal. Her family followed *Pranami* sect which was a fusion of Hinduism and Islam. She used to take young Mohan to the sect’s Prayer Hall in the town too. But she was extremely sensitive about coming into physical contact of the person who came to clean toilets and sweep the courtyard and of course his entire community. As noted earlier, she also insisted with Mohandas not to touch Uka and if the touch happened, he should have a bath – a purification process. Thus, in Hinduism, pollution by touch was a deeply entrenched conviction. Persons and the community disposing human excreta and cleaning the places were considered highly polluted and beyond purification. A mother doing similar work for her child could be purified after bath! This was a contradiction but well-accepted one. When child Mohandas could not change his mother’s belief and attitude even after quoting his understanding through *Jale Vishnu*, *Sthale Vishnu*, he understood that the problem was with the mind-set made up by generations of religious discourse. Hence, all his life Gandhiji connected removal of untouchability with changing the attitude and appealing for religious way of self-purification.

A related aspect of untouchability issue was that the communities that were condemned over centuries had become so emasculated that there was no wherewithal and desire from within to improve their living habits. In most places their habitations were filthy with muck, dirt and excreta, and the habits were unhealthy. Out of abject poverty they were forced to eat carrion; drinking liquor was the only relief from inhuman work and ignominy. Gandhiji appealed to them directly and through the

volunteers to persuade and guide the dejected community people towards improving their habits and get relieved of addictions. There was also a third dimension to the problem. The religious and caste leaders and also commoners did not come clean on the issue. Most of them indeed responded to Gandhiji's appeal to give up untouchability, but went back to original positions and behaviour once the upheaval settled. Gandhiji realised that one of the necessary steps to tackle the issue of sanitation and untouchability in a sustainable way in the country was 'turning the Searchlight inward.' Gandhiji used this expression for self- introspection. The action to follow introspection was acceptance and admission of wrong thinking and doing and then cleansing body, mind and soul. In this chapter Gandhiji's efforts in this direction is reviewed. The chapter ends with a very brief description of the present situation with respect to sanitation and the issue of untouchability in the country.

'Give up Carrion and Liquor'

Gandhiji hardly missed any opportunity to meet and talk to Dalit communities. He knew that the Dalit communities that had been compelled to get into habits and practices that were not good for them and for that matter for anybody. But, he also understood that it was for the community to get rid of such habits and practices. Carrion eating and liquor consumption were habits that had got instituted due to force and helplessness. When the caste people argued that how could the Dalits integrate with all others as the former consumed carrion and liquor, Gandhiji immediately pointed out that it was the caste Hindus who had pushed the Dalits to wall and left them with no choice. Issuing his second statement on untouchability from Yeravda Jail Gandhiji noted the following.

A correspondent, in spite of having received liberal education, suggests that before Harijans are put on a level with caste Hindus, they should become fit for such reception, shed their dirty habits, give up eating carrion; and another goes the length of saying that.... 'dirty occupations' should give them up. These critics forget that caste men are responsible for whatever bad habits are to be observed amongst the Harijans. The so-called higher castes have deprived them of facilities for keeping themselves clean and also the incentive for doing so.... That again is due to the high-handed indifference and criminal neglect of the 'high castes'.¹⁷⁸

178. CWMG Volume 51, p 346

Long before a letter writer had raised the issues of insanitation among Dalits in the country. Gandhiji noted as early as in 1921 that he was aware about the dejected communities' practice of eating carrion and consuming liquor and living in unhygienic environment. Gandhiji wanted the Dalits also to respond as part of their responsibility to rise to occasion and improve their lot. Poverty did not mean living dirty and filthy and cultivate bad and unhygienic habits. In 1925, addressing a meeting of Dalits in Porbandar in the presence of Diwan (once upon a time his father and grandfather were Diwans) he shared his agony and concern with the Dalits. He told them that Hindu society had treated them badly and efforts were being made to improve their behaviour. Congress was trying to take up a programme for their social betterment and removal of untouchability. However, he firmly stated that the Dalit community would also have to respond and rise to occasion:

Your help too is needed. Many Hindus tell me: "You take their side; but you should see for yourself how these people live. They eat carrion and they do not bathe or wash. One feels nausea at the sight. They have dirty habits. How then can we touch them?" There is some truth in this. The truth is worth listening to. You should give up whatever is bad in you and should help in reforming yourselves. Even God does not help those who do not help themselves. So it is I tell you to help yourselves.... The third thing is not to drink liquor. The man who drinks becomes Satan.¹⁷⁹

Most Dalit communities appeared to have been living in appalling conditions. Gandhiji seemingly gained first-hand experience. In his speech he also advised the Dalit community members a system of daily routine to be followed. He also said that to make their life orderly, they should be getting up at four in the morning, wash faces, clean eyes of mucus and pray to God. He also suggested that they should take the name of Rama or Krishna or Karsan as he was locally known. Rama was easy for him so he said that it should be easy for them too. He then suggested daily bath for all and for labourers he also suggested a bath in the night after their work. He asked them to keep their children clean and had said that if they were unclean, parents would be responsible. They should not hold teacher responsible for it. He advised them not to steal. Was *roti* and milk not enough for food or should they be eating meat if they gave up carrion? He would not mind if they did not spin but he would not tolerate bad habits.

179. CWMG Volume 26, p 176-7



It should be noted that in the scores of meetings that Gandhiji held with the Dalit communities, it was only in Porbandar that he spoke at length about giving up bad habits and had suggested a daily routine. Looking at the details, it would appear that he was patronising. Was he? Maybe, though not consciously. After all, Porbandar was the state where his father and grandfather had been Prime Ministers. He might have felt that people were his own. He might have felt that he was talking to 'Uka'. The concern could not be missed in his speeches. He was making an honest and heart-felt appeal to the Dalit communities to improve their physical quality of life with good sanitation and personal hygiene. Further important to note is that such addresses were not possible if there was no mutual love and respect born out of it. Gandhiji aimed for something more than the legal equality.

Gandhiji soon realised what an uphill task it was to convince the Dalit communities to give up their way of life and habits of food and drink. He was in Porbandar in February 1925 and only two months later he was speaking to Dalits in Dhaka, Hadaka, and Mongrel, all in Kathiawar. He then wrote and published about his visits in an article in *Navajivan* Issue of April 19, 1925.¹⁸⁰ It was a reality check for him. He witnessed both a higher level of cruelty by Caste Hindus and some bitter experience of the bad habits that persisted among the Dalits. On carrion eating, he noted:

When I pressed them to give up this unclean habit, they replied that it was an old practice and was difficult to give up. I tried hard to persuade them, but to no effect. They admitted that the practice should be given up, but pleaded that they did not have the necessary energy and said no more....Perhaps people may tolerate this unclean habit of the *Antyajias* but they will never mix with them with real love. Whatever the difficulty in the way, the *Antyajias* should make a determined effort to get rid of this habit.¹⁸¹

On furthering the discussion, Gandhiji was told by Dalits that if they were not asked to remove the dead cattle they could give up the habit of eating carrion. They also showed their willingness to suffer and rely on weaving for survival. Gandhiji also realised in the meeting that there was another strong unacceptable practice of inter-community untouchability among them. The weaving community of Dalits would not touch the dead animal removing community and they in turn would

180. *Ibid* p 528-9

181. *Ibid*

not touch the sanitation workers cleaning the human excreta. The rigidity was similar as that obtained among caste Hindus. Gandhiji did not give up his persuasion. He suggested that the only way out of the predicament in which the Dalit communities were, would be to give up untouchability and mix freely with all the communities including the lowest among them.

In May 1925, he was in Faridpur in Bengal. Here was a different type of problem. He was told by the people of Dalit community that they could enter the houses of caste Hindus and mix with them. The untouchability was in handling water. They could not touch water. They were only fish eaters, did not eat carrion. How could they join the mainstream with all, was their question. Gandhiji had discussed the options frankly with, them. He experienced two types of efforts by Dalits. One was using violent force. In Pune a group of young persons from the community gave him a felicitation address in English as the young leader was literate. Their approach was violent. When asked, they said that if the caste Hindus did not give up discrimination and did not grant them their due rights they would snatch it by force. Gandhiji explained that the other party would develop enmity and resistance if violent means were adopted to gain rights. Success, if any, would be short lived. There could also be counter violence. The second type of efforts was attempted in the South. Dalits over there had become Christians or Muslims. Gandhiji told them if there was any religion in them, it was on trial. Leaving *dharma* (in sense of duty) and joining other religion was a defeat of sort. He gave his own example. When he went to England for higher studies, his caste had excommunicated him and yet he did not give up his religion. He then suggested,

The third way and the only pure way, to my mind, is that of self-purification, i.e., being free from all the charges that are levelled against you.¹⁸²

Gandhiji then proceeded to explain that it was also the sure way. The caste Hindus also suffered from vices and bad habits, but that was for them to correct. The Dalits need not be scornful about it as it will only draw reaction. Of course Dalits could resort to drastic measures. For instance, the sanitary workers in Kolkata could go on strike and the city would come to knees, but the people will accumulate vengeance for them and strike when they get a chance. Another measure was to develop similar arrogance and refuse water from caste Hindus that too would end up hardening mutual attitudes. The sure and pure way was

182. CWMG Volume 27, p 12-16



to maintain dignified behaviour. Self-purification and dignity were the ways to win over.

During those times reformists were also active in Bengal. Dalits were arguing that the reformists had a political agenda. They were being used as pawns. Once the political agenda was served people were afraid that they would be left in lurch. Gandhiji said that reformists were sincere and they were doing as much as they could, but that was not enough. Reformists could become stern and would invite reactions. Dignified attitude meant no vindictiveness. And then Gandhiji gave his own example. In South Africa, European barber had refused to give a haircut to him so he got a pair of scissors and cut his hair. When asked by a European friend about the funny haircut he had done on self, Gandhiji told him the story. The European friend then gave him a haircut! Thus, Gandhiji used various ways to talk to Dalits as how they should be looking at self and try and improve.

In Purulia in West Bengal, he added a few more points. Sharing his thoughts he had said that during his Bengal tour he learned about Dalits from Bihar who had settled there had fallen to vices of drinking and gambling. The vices were common among the caste Hindus too, but he wanted the Dalits to get rid of it because evils were not to be imitated. In October 1925 he toured Kachchh extensively. There too he realised that untouchability was not as severe as it was in other parts of the country. Caste people were not sensitive to touch. Twenty five families took pledge that they would give up meat eating and liquor consumption, and would wear Khadi. In the summer of 1927 he was again on the tour of South India. He had a meeting with Adi Karnatakas. To them he assured that untouchability would disappear soon from the society. To them he said that being a Hindu how could they behave irreligiously. He said:

Well, nothing is cheap that holds religion cheap, nothing is dear that holds religion dear. I tell you I find it difficult to persuade the orthodox to mix with you, for they tell me, that you are given to beef-eating, liquor and the like. If you will therefore cleanse yourselves you will make work easy for me.¹⁸³

Similarly, in October 1927 he met Adi-Dravidians in Calicut. He perhaps learned that smoking was common and hence he told them to give

183. CWMG Volume 34, p 221

up smoking at once. In December 1927 he toured Orissa (now Odisha). An experience was quite jolting for a seasoned person like Gandhiji. He later recounted it in *Young India*. It had hurt Gandhiji deeply and it would hurt a sensitive reader even to this day. The untouchables were rated so low and so undignified. A reproduction of it alone will justify discussion:

The long deferred Orissa visit has come to fill the bitter cup of sorrow and humiliation. It was at Bolgarh, thirty-one miles from the nearest railway station, that whilst I was sitting and talking with Dinabandhu Andrews on the 11th instant, a man with a half-bent back wearing only a dirty loin-cloth came crouching in front of us. He picked up a straw and put it in his mouth and then lay flat on his face with arms outstretched and then raised himself, folded his hands, bowed, took out the straw, arranged it in his hair and was about to leave. I was writhing in agony whilst I witnessed the scene. Immediately the performance was finished, I shouted for an interpreter, asked the friend to come near and began to talk to him. He was an untouchable living in a village six miles away, and being in Bolgarh for the sale of his load of faggots and having heard of me had come to see me. Asked why he should have taken the straw in his mouth, he said that was to honour me. I hung my head in shame. The price of honour seemed to me to be too great to bear. My Hindu spirit was deeply wounded. I asked him for a gift. He searched for a copper about his waist.

"I do not want your copper, but I want you to give me something better," I said.

"I will give it," he replied.

I had ascertained from him that he drank and ate carrion because it was custom.

"The gift I want you to give me is a promise never again to take the straw in your mouth for any person on earth, it is beneath man's dignity to do so; never again to drink because it reduces man to the condition of a beast, and never again to eat carrion, for it is against Hinduism and no civilized person would ever eat carrion."

"But my people will excommunicate me, if I do not drink, and eat carrion," the poor man said.

"Then suffer excommunication and if need be leave the village."

This downtrodden humble man made the promise. If he keeps it, his threefold gift is more precious than the rupees that generous



countrymen entrust to my care. This untouchability is our greatest shame. The humiliation of it is sinking deeper.¹⁸⁴

Gandhiji noted that he realised the full import of Zamindari system in Orissa. He was told that the zamindars, the rajas and the local police had conspired to frighten the rayats out of coming near him. Gandhiji noted that he flattered himself with the belief that the rajas, the zamindars and the pettiest police officials ceased to distrust or fear him. But in Orissa he came to know that people were told, on pain of punishment, not to come near him or to take part in any demonstration in his honour. In other states he found that such warnings did not deter people. In Orissa it had. The experiences of Orissa chastened him. Gandhiji also realised that the caste Hindus could force the Dalits to keep doing what they had been assigned. Removing of dead animals was one such compulsion. From there arose the habit of eating carrion, and liquor was concomitant.

The issue kept coming up. Because when Gandhiji advised the particular Dalit communities to give up carrion eating, the ground level problems surfaced. In an interview given to Press on December 5, 1932 the question of temple entry was being discussed and the correspondent pointed out that some *Sanatanists* and temple priests had said that they were willing to admit the Harijan in temple provided they were allowed to be purified. Gandhiji strongly said no and added that if any purification was needed it was for those who were now admitting the Dalits in temples for not having allowed them for centuries. In this context Gandhiji narrated an instance. Dr. Ambedkar had brought to Gandhiji's notice an incident that took place in the neighbourhood of Poona. There Harijans had decided not to eat carrion. They were prepared to forgo the gain they were getting from the job of removing dead animals. Caste Hindus did not like the Harijans' decision not to remove dead animals. They forced Harijans to eat carrion, saying that it was their dharma! Gandhiji told the correspondent that in that case caste Hindus were the real instigators, and just as in law the instigators were not exempted from punishment, caste Hindus should have been taken to task. It was they who should have undergone purification.¹⁸⁵ Later, when he embarked on his Harijan Yatra in the South during April 1934, a correspondent asked him to comment on *Arya Samajis* performing *shuddhi* before taking Harijans in the fold. To

184. CWMG Volume 35, p 407-9

185. *Ibid* p 126

this Gandhiji reiterated that if any *shuddhi* was required, it was required of a caste Hindu who committed the sin of believing in untouchability.¹⁸⁶

Gandhiji was able to understand the problems when he asked people to change. Status quo was not only desired by the caste Hindus but also by the Dalits with reference to disposal of dead animal and carrion eating. Gandhiji had a solution for it also. In a letter that he wrote to the Prime Minister of Bhavnagar Sir Prabhashankar Pattani on January 5, 1933 he clearly mentioned the problem and a probable solution. He categorically wrote that he did not agree on conditional entry in the temples and the condition being giving up carrion eating. The Dalit groups engaged took a position that people forced them to remove dead cattle and would charge them for animal's flesh. They consumed carrion because they paid for it. So if anybody wanted them to give up eating carrion, the proposer should make alternative arrangement for disposal of the dead animals. Gandhiji wrote that he could see some cunning in this and it was obvious that a community would respond in such way. The state or society in such cases should adopt the following steps. The cattle owner was the owner of the dead animal too, if he gave up the ownership when the cattle was dead, then by default State owned the dead animal. The state should take charge and pay some money to the Dalit group who would then have economic incentive to dispose it. The State should also use every part of the body for public good. All parts of the dead animal could then be used beneficially. The handler should be asked to bury the remains deep in soil so that no infection of contamination takes place.¹⁸⁷ It should be noted clearly that Gandhiji was suggesting that the Dalits who cleared the dead animals should be paid for the work.

Gandhiji did not stop at merely asking the Dalits groups to stop eating carrion. He made further propositions. He understood that disposal of dead animal had its economics. Skinning and tanning were one part and disposal was another and later part included the consumption of carrion. In fact, some people in the villages even argued that if they don't eat carrion they may stop doing the work of skinning and tanning also and if they resorted to only skinning and tanning what would happen to flesh? Gandhiji in the statements issued on untouchability from Yeravda Jail during November-December 1932, appealed repeatedly to Dalit groups to give up carrion eating. However, he also clearly instructed the Harijan volunteers to work towards improving the skinning and tanning

186. CWMG Volume 57, p 355-56

187. *Ibid* p 373 for full text of the letter



techniques so that it became more sanitised and less wasteful. He was keen on this and applied mind to the problem. Responding to an American friend who had been inquiring as to how Americans could help Dalit improvement work Gandhiji *inter alia* wrote,

The way America can help in this internal movement of reform is... secondly, by placing at the disposal of the reformers the free aid of experts with reference to the economic question. For instance, there is the tremendous problem of carrion-eaters. They will not give up carrion-eating so long as they continue to take charge of dead cattle, which they skin and whose flesh they eat. I have myself tried to find clean and expeditious method of skinning carcasses and making the best use of all the contents of these carcasses... America could easily send us free expert assistance in matters such as I have mentioned...¹⁸⁸

It would be of relevance to note here a case to know how Gandhiji's advice to Harijans for giving up carrion eating and liquor worked in the villages. The case is also interesting because it covers a large group of villages in Maharashtra. It was reported in the *Harijan* of March 25, 1933 by Gandhiji. Aundh, then, was a state comprising 72 villages. Pandit Satavlekar, a Vedic scholar of the state had assumed interest in Harijan uplift. Narrating the process and the outcome of efforts he sent reports to Gandhiji upon the latter's request. The Chief of the state was a Brahmin and he was for removal of untouchability. He proposed three conditions for removal of untouchability and granting temple entry. One was giving up carrion, second was giving up eating food leftovers, and third was daily bath. The Dalit community's response from all 72 villages was:

- It was impossible for them to give up carrion as they got it free. They were willing to give up carrion if fresh and clean meat was made available to them free.
- They would give up food leftovers if they were given clean food.
- They did have enough water for bath and wash.
- They were indifferent to temple entry.

The matter was allowed to rest there. Another volunteer V.R. Shinde who was firm on abolishing the untouchability made another attempt. He tried to appeal and convince people of the reforms. But it did not work. Pandit Satavlekar and his team then began with a village sanitation programme. They started *Prabhat feri* and cleaned the courtyards and surroundings of the houses that were neglected.

188. CWMG Volume 52, p 24

Bhajan and *Kathas* followed. A Dalit and a non-Dalit teacher started a school and young ones turned up. The impact was impressive. Over time Ranisaheba of the State encouraged the initiatives by introducing prizes for cleanliness. Some Harijan houses were cleaner than caste Hindu houses. Half of the prizes were won by Harijans. Untouchability vanished in ten years. Temple entry became a non-issue as it was naturally taking place.¹⁸⁹ The report however, did not contain any mention of the status on carrion and beef eating. It should be presumed that it was given up.

Self-Purification

Gandhiji's work for improving sanitation and campaign for removal of untouchability was also an essential component of Satyagraha with self and society. Satyagraha implied process of self-purification. Sanitation and Hygiene were for him important even for embarking on spiritual journey. The quest for Truth took him to an understanding that all human beings and for that matter all living beings were equal before the ultimate Truth who he called God. Cleaning self and environment for Gandhiji was the first step in the act of self-purification. The second and most important part of self-purification was giving up age old prejudices against the Dalits who were the silent and suffering sanitation workers in the society. Gandhiji wanted that every caste Hindu should first realise the gross injustice that was meted out to Dalits from centuries. The second stage was its admission and sense of remorse. Finally, he wanted that each one of caste Hindus worked for reparation i.e., removing untouchability and helping improve their welfare. State had a role in removal of untouchability and in improving the economic condition of the Dalits, but for Gandhiji it was mainly the society which has to respond. Gandhiji introduced personal hygiene, village and town sanitation as a constructive programme, Removal of untouchability was both a constructive programme and one of the eleven vows that each Satyagrahi had to follow. It may be mentioned that eleven vows or – *ekadash vrat* were first introduced as Ashram observances and later made mandatory for all Satyagrahis. Thus, following as a vow at individual level removal of untouchability was the process of self-purification and its removal from society was a constructive programme.

In 1924, Congress passed a resolution to remove untouchability from the country. Had Gandhiji not influenced it, it would not have appeared in Congress's social reform programme. Gandhiji initiated

189. Readers interested in full account should refer CWMG Volume 54 pp 190 - 193



the self-purification process from Ashrams in Ahmedabad. He had admitted a Harijan Family at first then more joined when everyone in Ashram also started learning leather work. Gandhiji did not wait for a battalion of Congress volunteers to join him in the campaign for removal of untouchability. It became his mission as we have already seen in the earlier chapters. Important point that needs to be made is that for Gandhiji removal of untouchability was not a political programme alone. Far from it, from the very beginning of his campaign he maintained that it was a self-purification programme in which the Dalits and caste Hindus had to immerse themselves. Gandhiji was suggesting the use of soul which worked through love and self-suffering. The force of soul was obtained by growth from within and the process was self-suffering and self-purification.¹⁹⁰ In August 1918, when he was working on Non-Cooperation Movement he wrote to Millie Polak that the rich experiencing of love towards all others makes an added call on such service as he might be capable of rendering to humanity. But service to humanity was service of self and service of self was self-purification.¹⁹¹

If self-purification was accepted as the means to gain *Swaraj* then the struggle could not have been limited to political contest. People argued with Gandhiji that by making removal of untouchability a condition for *Swaraj* Gandhiji was making a strategic error. The caste Hindus and *Sanatanis* who were fanatic about the issue of untouchability and justified it as a religious dictum, would give up the Non-Cooperation Movement and support British. Gandhiji argued that *Sanatanis* also believed that British should go because the religion and culture had suffered adversely due them. But even if Sanatanis withdrew from the non-cooperation, the others need not withdraw because *Swaraj* with prevalence of untouchability was not real *Swaraj*. Gandhiji wrote in this context that if non-cooperation was a form of self-purification, it should be taken up without thinking of the consequences. Even if one non-cooperator was left, the victory would come through that person.¹⁹²

When Gandhiji began to campaign for removal of untouchability some people argued with him that as he had suggested and provided leadership to fight the British by non-cooperation the Dalits should also plan and initiate non-cooperation movement against caste Hindus and

190. CWMG Volume 10, p 248

191. CWMG Volume 18, p 38 Millie Polak was wife of Henry Polak, Gandhiji's close friend and an associate in South Africa.

192. CWMG Volume 19, p 347

Sanatanis. Gandhiji noted about a fiery reformer and a warm champion of the suppressed classes who was impatient to remove the serfdom of his pariah community and was to advise non-cooperation with other Hindus. Gandhiji told him that he too was an ardent worker committed to Dalit welfare work but he did not advocate non-cooperation by Dalits against caste Hindus until a pure and selfless soul rose in their midst. Non-cooperation was a movement of self-purification, self-help, and self-reliance.

Gandhiji also had a strong practical reason to invite the people of the country in getting into the act of self-purification. In his assessment the British government gained hold over the Indian subject because Indians had serious weaknesses. Hindu-Muslim question, Brahmins and non-Brahmins question, untouchability issue, kings and the subjects, capitalists and workers, habit of drinking and many other weaknesses marred the Indian society and this gave the British an edge. He elsewhere noted that British were therefore comfortable in 'Divide and Rule policy'. Gandhiji said,

It is because of this that I have described our movement as one of self-purification. I have described untouchability as the greatest blot on Hindu society as the latter has been guilty of Dyerism¹⁹³ in its treatment of the communities regarded as untouchable.¹⁹⁴

In explaining to an English lady in March 1924, Gandhiji wrote that his method was Indian method and not Western. It was a method in which the community had to undergo internal reform and self-purification from the very bottom. Removing the curse of untouchability was to do penance for the sin committed by the Hindus. It had been an act of degrading own religion. He also explained that the community with whom he and his associates were working also indulged in drinking and drugs and they had to be weaned away from that. Removing the curse of intoxication and drugs not only purified the nation, but it also deprived Government of an immoral source of revenue.¹⁹⁵

It was difficult for the rational minded persons to accept Gandhiji's position to take up his programme of untouchability as a self-purification programme. A person argued that he did not understand how embracing a

193. Dyerism must have been temporary usage after Col. Dyer who had ordered indiscriminate firing on total unarmed people who had gathered in the Jalianwala Baugh in Punjab.

194. CWMG Volume 20, p 408

195. CWMG Volume 23, p 244



person externally would sustain if the mind-set was not tolerant. He also could not relate the need to link irrevocably the untouchability removal programme with *Satyagraha* for *Swaraj*. Untouchability was one of the evils prevalent among the Hindu society and no society was free from evils. Hence untouchability could not be an impediment for a political struggle by a slave community for freedom. Such evils could be tackled once there was independence by legal instruments if not by voluntary efforts. Responding to this argument Gandhiji said that he abhorred with his whole soul the system that has reduced a large number of Hindus to a level less than that of animals. He would not have taken the position he has if the Dalits were left to themselves to mind their own business. Unfortunately, they could neither exercise their mind nor were they left with any business. They did not have place to call their own; were not allowed to walk on paths they cleaned and did not have clothes to wear. Gandhiji was unusually sharp in his expression. He wrote that the letter writer had talked about toleration but,

It is an abuse of language to say that we Hindus extend any toleration towards our *Panchama* brothers. We have degraded them and then have the audacity to use their very degradation against their rise. *Swaraj* for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen.... If it is necessary for us to buy peace with the Musalmans as a condition of *swaraj*, it is equally necessary for us to give peace to the *Panchama* before we can, with any show of justice or self-respect, talk of *swaraj*. I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange King Log for King Stork. Hence for me the movement of *swaraj* is a movement of self-purification.¹⁹⁶

In January 1925, Gandhiji delivered the presidential address in the Kathiavar Political Conference. Kathiavar was and still today is notorious for practicing untouchability and oppressing the Dalits. He said that he firmly believed that Hindus would regain the strength of soul if by serving the suppressed and receiving their blessing they carried on a process of self-purification. The Hindu who would serve the suppressed would be a saviour of Hinduism and would enshrine himself in the hearts of his suppressed brothers and sisters. In April 30, 1925 issue he wrote that there was no place in Hinduism for the kind of untouchability that was being practiced. He had carefully studied *Shastras* for the purpose and found no evidence justifying untouchability. He was therefore appealing

196. CWMG Volume 24, p 227

to the caste Hindus and *Sanatanis* to give up the bad practice. The only way to reform Hinduism was to serve the Dalits. Gandhiji carefully used religious terminology to make his point emphatically. He wrote that Hindus could not wash off their sins without self-purification.¹⁹⁷ Later in another issue he added to this argument. For the seeker of Truth removal of untouchability, Hindu-Muslim unity and such things were internal. It was self-purification. Everyone had own dirt to wash. The Hindus had untouchability; the Indians had the Hindu-Muslim. Thus every country had to wash its own curse. In the issue of July 2, 1925 of *Young India* answering a string of questions he explained what he meant by self-purification.

Self-purification means cleansing oneself of all impurities whether of the mind, speech or body. The 'untouchable' friends were asked to think no evil, speak no untruth or abuse and to keep the body pure by careful wash, pure food and avoidance of carrion or other impure food or intoxicating liquors or drugs.¹⁹⁸

Campaigner that Gandhiji was, he built up his case systematically and step by step. By introducing point after point, responding to the questions and doubts raised and by consistently appealing to the hearts, he took the symphony of his untouchability song to a crescendo when he announced 'fast unto death' on September 20, 1932 from the Yeravda prison. He argued that when Hindus would remove the taint of untouchability with a deliberate and conscious effort and not by way of policy but by self-purification, the nation would get new strength born out of consciousness. This to him was attainment of *Swaraj*.

Even before the Poona Pact was made Gandhiji had been clear that the problem hardly had political solution. In the issue of June 30, 1927 of *Young India* he wrote that he was in entire agreement with the letter writer that there was no swaraj without Hindu-Muslim unity, much less was swaraj there without the removal of the shame of Hinduism – the untouchability. This was followed by a remarkable statement which later echoed in the Second Round Table Conference in 1932 and at the time of the Poona Pact. He wrote,

I am unconcerned with the question, what place untouchables will have in any political constitution that may be drawn up. Every one of the artificial props, that may be set up in the Constitution, will be broken to bits, if we Hindus do not wish to play the game. The reasoning I

197. CWMG Volume 26, p 463

198. CWMG Volume 27, p 318



have given against separate electorates and against separate treatment in the Constitution is equally applicable in the case of untouchables. This removal of untouchability is not to be brought about by any legal enactment. It will only be brought about, when the Hindu conscience is roused to action, and of its own accord removes the shame. It is a duty the touchables owe to the untouchables.¹⁹⁹

In January 1928 Gandhiji addressed a meeting in Vartej in Bhavnagar, Gujarat. He took the argument of duty further. He said that if a Hindu did service to an untouchable he did not oblige the latter at all, he obliged himself. The Hindus, who were responsible for the existence of their so-called untouchable brothers, had committed many sins. Whatever they did by way of self-purification and expiation for those sins would be inadequate. He then took it on his person and added that whenever he had a chance to serve the untouchables, he considered it a God-sent opportunity to do some slight atonement for past sins.²⁰⁰

Gandhiji's position and his work and campaign for Harijan uplift in the country before the British Communal Award was declared have to be carefully understood in order to analyse his stubborn stand against the separate electorate for the oppressed class proposed in 1932. From his presidential address in the Godhra Political Conference in November 1917 to September 1932 when he undertook fast unto death, he had consistently analysed the problem of untouchability in the religious context. His call for self-purification was not a political strategy but a sincere appeal to change attitude, feeling and behaviour of the caste Hindus towards the Dalits. The strategy part if any was his taking on the *Sanatanis* and the religious heads who had misled the Hindus for centuries by saying that untouchability comes from *Shastras*. He clearly stated that even if *Shastras* had any evidence construing legitimisation of untouchability, he was in for reforming it. He wrote after the September 1932 fast during the Guruvayur temple entry controversy on what he thought *Shastras* were and how they should be interpreted. He held that there was no sanction in the *Shastras* for untouchability as it was being practiced.²⁰¹

Gandhiji was gravely concerned over the possible consequences of the political solution proposed by the way of separate electorate. As mentioned, Ambedkar fought for the political space and so did

199. CWMG Volume 34, p 75

200. CWMG Volume 35, p 485

201. Those interested in details refer Sushila Nayar Volume VII, *op.cit.* p 97-8

the reformers who were with him. There was a definite strategy in the approach Ambedkar and reformist had taken. It was that of empowering the suppressed via Constitution. Gandhiji apparently saw the political solution derailing his socio-religious approach to mend the ways of caste Hindus. Further, he also perhaps feared that political positioning of Dalits with constitutional backing would lead to hardening of attitude of the caste Hindus and the rift between the two would become permanent. He visualised disintegration of the society. Gandhiji was also downright honest in attempting and suggesting repentance and reparation to the wrong that had been committed against a section of human society for centuries. Such was his learning from the childhood. Teenager Mohandas had sought a different kind of atonement to the wrong he had done with his elder brother. The incident is well-known; Mohandas and his brother had stolen a bit of gold from an armlet worn by the brother to settle a debt. In the *Autobiography* Gandhiji captured the confession in the following way,

I also made up my mind to confess it to my father....I was afraid of the pain that I should cause him. But I felt that the risk should be taken; that there could not be a cleansing without a clean confession....I decided to write out the confession....In this note not only did I confess my guilt, but I asked adequate punishment for it....I also pledged myself never to steal in future.²⁰²

Gandhiji went through the process of self-purification in the incident. This is how Gandhi lived and grew. Turning searchlight inward leads an individual to the process of admission or acknowledgement of guilt, repentance and preparedness for reparation. For Gandhiji each caste Hindu had to go through this process. For him it was not a group giving response to another group. He not only felt intensely about the issue, as it has been shown in earlier chapters, he also committed himself to seek atonement. He also appealed to all. He received positive signals and responses. He wanted the response to grow and catch momentum. He perhaps grew very confident that the campaign will result in removal of the untouchability 'root and branch' and his approach was the right approach. Interpreting Gandhiji's 'fast unto death' therefore, Louis Fischer after giving a detailed account of the response of caste Hindus all over the country, by way of opening the temple door, dining together,

202. Gandhi M.K. 1927. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. 1976 Reprint Part I chapter VIII



giving access to public wells to draw water, admission to educational institutions, noted:

A spirit of reform, penance, and self-purification swept the land... .A cold political agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar, without a fast, would have had no such effect on the nation; it might have redressed a legal Harijan grievance, but it would have remained a dead letter as far as the Hindu's personal treatment of untouchables was concerned....The political pact was important only after the emotional churning which Gandhi's fast gave the country.²⁰³

As noted the emotional effervescence settled after the Poona Pact. Gandhiji had an inkling about it. In the Press statement that he issued on the day when he had broken fast he said that a sacrificial fire had been lit and if God did not take his life, he was confident that untouchability would be wiped out. He believed that there were thousands of earnest reformers who would be active in the process. He warned that the breaking of the fast carried with it a sure promise of a resumption of it if the reform was not relentlessly pursued and achieved within a measureable period.²⁰⁴ He once again reiterated that the political part of the settlement was important but it occupied a small place in the vast field of reform that had to be tackled by caste Hindus. Gandhiji had a plan of action intensifying the reform drive. But the Yeravda prison authority severely restricted his actions. It took more than a month for restoration. In November and December of 1932 he drafted 13 Statements on Untouchability the content of which has been already discussed in the previous chapter.

The journal *Harijan* was an outcome of the understanding that motivation, inspiration and discussion on the issue would have to be continued persistently. As noted earlier, *Harijanbandhu* in Gujarati was last in the series to be launched. In almost every issue in the beginning Gandhiji called upon every Gujarati Hindu to immolate himself in the *yajna* to purify the Hindu religion.²⁰⁵ He was also clear that the *yajna* did not mean propaganda through speeches, pamphlets, social inter-dining, etc. The most effective propaganda was pure constructive work. However, he understood that pure constructive work would take time in getting

203. Louis Fischer, 1950. "Was the Mahatma's Torment Unnecessary?" Reprinted in Homar A Jack. (Editor) 1956. *The Gandhi Reader*, Grove Press New York p 295

204. Sushila Nayar Volume VII, *Op. cit.* p 91

205. It is only ironic that critical mass of Gujarati Hindus grew more intolerant over years and continue to demonstrate it even during present times. Gandhiji would have been a very sad had he been witnessing it.

well entrenched, propaganda had to accompany it. The method for him was as important. He repeatedly advised the volunteers against using any kind of 'brutal force'. Non-violence and love were to be applied with all sincerity. The orthodox came down heavily on the volunteers but Gandhiji maintained that they were entitled to every courtesy and consideration. They could be won over only by love, self-sacrifice and by exercising self-restraint. Sushila Nayar notes that the Sanatanists did not see in the same light. The extremists let loose tirade of hatred and slander against the Harijan workers. Gandhiji was also not spared. Bulletins were issued against him and he was abused openly. He was quoted out of context and it was used against him. In January 1933 Gandhiji wrote in a letter the following:

So much untruth, almost bordering on the libellous, is being broadcast at the present moment about me that I should warn you not to believe anything against me unless you have it verified...²⁰⁶

It should be noted that Gandhiji touched the chords of the common people in the country and they rose to consciousness and responded so that Gandhiji did not die in the fast. But the orthodox waited for the event to blow over and came out in open once the effervescence settled. Gandhiji was able to see it clearly. He noted that *Sanatanists* thought that the Hinduism of their belief was in danger. They had money with them and they were using it freely. They also resorted to *goondaism* and were using brute force to break up meetings.

The political solution also came under attack soon. Ambedkar faced criticism and he went to Gandhiji with an amendment that Gandhiji refused. Thus heart and head both were failing. Gandhiji went in deep introspection and on April 30, 1933 he declared 21 day fast that began on May 8. He was also set free from the prison the next day. He said in the statement to the press that the fast was against nobody in particular, but it was particularly against his self. It was a prayer for the purification of self and associates, for greater vigilance and watchfulness over the means that were followed. Shocking cases of impurity had come to his notice and through the fast he was making an appeal to people to give up such means. To the flurry of letters and communications that reached him he responded in *Harijanbandhu* that explained his personal disposition and his belief on resolving the problem of untouchability. He wrote,

206. Sushila Nayar Volume VII. *Op. cit.* p 108



Those who tremble at this fast should give up their attachment to the body.... The body perishes but the *atman* does not. It is the *atman* which acts or does not act. It lives forever; it is immortal....all effort is related to the soul.... At the moment, I have only one burning desire, viz., that we should all realize that this task of abolishing untouchability is a religious one and cannot be achieved except through religious means. The purification of all other Hindus lies in the service of Harijans. Hinduism will not be purified, notwithstanding the improvement in the economic and political condition of the Harijans,... In order to achieve this, it is necessary to bring about a change of heart among the countless Hindus. It should be clear as daylight to everyone that this filth cannot be got rid of except through self-purification. The best way to make this clear is to take up the *yajna* of fasting in thought, word and deed. Mere bodily fasting is suffering in vain. It may be mere hypocrisy.²⁰⁷

Gandhiji's spirit and energy were fully employed in the cause of removal of untouchability. Leaving the *Sanatanists* and reformists alone, people in general were with Gandhiji and understood his language. In November 1933 Gandhiji set out on Harijan yatra. It went on for nine months. He covered the entire country and people not only listened to him but also donated generously for the cause of Dalit uplift. Gandhiji continued his appeal for self-purification in the process of working for Dalits. It was specifically in the yatra that he also appealed to the Dalit communities to go through the process of self-purification by following three dos and don'ts; learn and practice sanitation in their homes, neighbourhood and personal hygiene, give up carrion and liquor consumption. No wonder towards the middle of the yatra in February 1934, he said at Mulki in Karnataka that he had said it thousand times that the removal of untouchability movement was a movement of self-purification.²⁰⁸

Torch Bearer

During the entire period of the freedom struggle for the country Gandhiji alone came out as the leader who dealt with the twin issues of sanitation and hygiene and removal of untouchability. One should immediately remember Amritlal Thakkar who was the first volunteer to work on his own initiative for the removal of untouchability and amelioration of the Dalit communities in the country. He found a strong

207. CWMG Volume 55, p 135

208. CWMG Volume 57, p 218

and perhaps superior partner in Gandhiji. Gandhiji dealt with the issues most comprehensively. The other leaders who contributed their might in the freedom struggle were in full agreement with Gandhiji on the twin issues, but none showed the inclination to take it up at a personal level with the intensity with which Gandhiji did it. It appears that Ambedkar clearly opted for the political reform rather than the social one. One has to bear with him for the bitterness he had developed out of his personal experience. But it must also be placed on record that his taking the problem of oppressed class into political domain yielded little help to the social reform process. He was honest to admit that he was not interested in any social reform of the kind that Gandhiji was looking for.

The Government of India Bill was passed by the British Parliament and it got the Royal assent on August 4, 1935 and it became Government of India Act 1935. The political fate of the Dalits was attached with it. The components of Poona Pact were there and Dalits with persistent struggle under the leadership of Ambedkar gained a definite political space. Ambedkar and his reformer associates seemingly did not apply their minds on sanitation and hygiene situation in the country and among the Dalits. Untouchability issue was also political for them. Ambedkar did not push for any integration or assimilation of Dalits into the main society. He was an intellectual in his own right and had been exposed to modernity. He did not look kindly at the Hindu religion and its followers. The implementation of the Government of India Act implied province level elections and regional governments formed by the political parties that had come into existence by then. None of the parties that represented religious and other population in the country accepted the Act. However, since it was going to be implemented the parties could not have kept away from fighting for power. This was the beginning of vote bank politics in India. Ambedkar gave a call to depressed classes to leave the Hindu fold and choose 'any other religion which guaranteed them equal status'. Sushila Nayar notes that this call was taken as an invitation by Christian missionaries, Muslims and Sikhs to vie with one another for the souls of Harijans.²⁰⁹ Obviously, it was not because they were interested in removal of untouchability, but to increase their presence in the legislative assemblies. Another political strategist would have fumed and gone for manipulations. Gandhiji, from the inner recesses of his heart manifested pure love. Speaking in a meeting of Gandhi Seva Sangh, he said,

209. Sushila Nayar, Volume VII *op.cit.* p 353



Whatever Dr. Ambedkar does, we must bear it in all humility. Not only that, it would be service to Harijans. If he really hits us with shoes, we must bear even that.... If he and other Harijans who have no faith in Hinduism embrace another religion, that too would make for our expiation. We deserve such treatment.²¹⁰

When an issue is politicised it yields to expediency, manipulations, exaggerations and propaganda. The word spread that Dr. Ambedkar could hand over 50 million people to those who were willing to accept them! Missionaries and evangelists all over the world started huge propaganda. All kinds of lies were circulated. It also had manipulations. Gandhiji explained that a missionary had stated that a huge number had converted to Christianity giving the impression that it was due to the movement led by Dr. Ambedkar. In fact the number that was in circulation referred to conversion that have taken place from the time when the first church had come up in India centuries ago! Conversions indeed took place at some pace after the Government of India Act 1935 came into force, but what was the condition of the converts? Gandhiji found the condition of Indian Christians no better. In the issue of 19 December 1936 *Harijan* he wrote,

Indeed the taint of untouchability persists in spite of the nominal change of faith so far as the social status is concerned. Needless to say I am referring to the masses, not individuals.²¹¹

Gandhiji had deplored the amount of money that was being spent by the Christian missions to secure conversions of Harijans and giving them hope of their freedom. Gandhiji rightly knew that the masses among Dalits had been linked and intertwined with other Hindus and deeply embedded in the cultural past. Unless the society changed its attitude towards them and embraced them as brothers, change of label would not change their real status. Gandhiji was worried also that if such conversions happened in large proportions there would be savage feuds between the converts and the non-converts. Interestingly, missionaries of various descriptions kept calling Gandhiji to declare that their cause was right. C.F. Andrews and Gandhiji had difference of opinion on the issue. Andrews took a position that he was opposed to proselytisation, but if an individual was convinced after thought and prayer, he should be allowed to convert.

Muslims and Sikhs were not behind. They started wooing the untouchables to convert. The discussion should end here because

210. *Ibid* (Raja)

211. CWMG Volume 64, p150

the subject is sanitation and the communities identified with them traditionally. But it would be instructive to end it with a stand that finally Dr. Ambedkar took on the issue after having given the call. For political reasons he could not have supported the Dalits to convert into Christians because it would only strengthen the hands of British rulers. Muslims would give equal rights to Dalits as a religious follower. But in the final analysis Ambedkar wrote,

....purely from the standpoint of the Hindus....Sikhism is the best. If the depressed class joined Islam or Christianity, they not only go out of Hindu religion, but they also go out of Hindu culture....if they become Sikhs, they remain within the Hindu culture....²¹²

Ambedkar could sense the ground reality and he was aware of the larger consequences for the country. President of the Hindu Mahasabha, Dr. Moonje agreed to Ambedkar's suggestion of Dalits entering into Sikhism and he sent the formula to M.C. Rajah, another well-known leader of the Dalits based in South India. Rajah, in a sharply worded rebuke wrote to Moonje that he would have understood his concern if he had placed the spiritual interest of the depressed classes first. He had only promoted communal interest of the Hindus and the Sikhs. Rajah wrote, "We are not sheep and cattle to be bartered away in this fashion." He urged the Hindu Mahasabha to address itself to the task of making it easy for the depressed classes to stay within the Hindu fold.²¹³

Gandhiji was unceasingly saying that in the heart the Dalit communities felt they were the condemned brothers of the same religious belief and they longed to be integrated. How could otherwise a caste Hindu sin against him? When the temples were thrown open the Dalits thronged them with faith and devotion. And let us look at the order of the Travancore state with regard to opening up of the temple doors all over the state. Coming from Hindu Orthodoxy a proclamation by the Maharaja on November 13, 1936 said,

Profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of our religion,.... solicitous that none of our Hindu subjects should, by reason of birth, caste, or community, be denied the consolation and solace of the Hindu faith, we have decided and hereby declare, ordain and command that, subject to such rules and conditions as may be laid down and imposed by us for preserving their proper atmosphere, and maintaining their rituals and observances, there should henceforth be no restriction

212. Sushila Nayar Volume VII, *op.cit.* p 358

213. *Ibid* p 359



placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering or worshipping at temples controlled by us and our Government.²¹⁴

This was an illustration at a higher level where institutional heads went through change of heart. In early 1937, Gandhiji visited Travancore and covered the entire state. Temple entry was symbolic. But the hearts opened, process of self-purification set in. On January 15, Gandhiji visited a famous temple of Kanya Kumari. He was accompanied by a large party of Dalits. It was a dream realised for them. On January 16, when he addressed a meeting at Quilon, he told the audience of the joy he felt at the temple where he saw beaming faces of tens of thousands of Dalit men and women mingling with *savarnas* without slightest distinction. Sushila Nayar has noted that throughout the nine-day tour of the State, Gandhiji's mood remained one of unalloyed joy. Thousands *savarnas* and *avarnas* alike, accompanied him to the temples, thousands of others lined the routes leading to them, all observing exemplary silence. Gandhiji was moved to his innermost depths.²¹⁵

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214. *Ibid* p 361

215. *Ibid* p 365





Epilogue

Such is the story of the man who determinedly followed his Truth, relentlessly worked for it through *Ahimsa* and illuminated the path for others. Gandhiji wanted to see *Swachchh Bharat*- Clean India, clean in body and physical environment and clean in heart. As shown in previous chapters Gandhiji carried out his work and advice until the penultimate day of his life. Today, we have fallen severely short in following his path. Almost after seven decades of his departure, we as Independent India are still not free of open defecation. Our solid waste management leaves much to be desired. Public places and travel modes continue to be filthy most of the times. Municipalities have achieved limited success in keeping the towns and cities clean and sanitised. Vector diseases such as Malaria, Dengue, and Chikungunya have become rampant and taking toll on the public health.

It will not be out of place to look at Gandhi, yet again. His life – long struggle with cleanliness and sanitation – be it urban or rural - is still topical. Be it Swachch Bharat Mission or cleaning our rivers, even after nearly seventy years, Mahatma's words ring true. We can feel the anger and remorse with which he wrote in "Our Dirty Ways". "If we do not keep our backyards clean, our Swaraj will have a foul stench", he wrote. There is also need to cleanse our inner selves and purify our hearts and have love towards all. Let us continue to strive with all sincerity for betterment of all those who have suffered because they were doing the cleaning work.

It is time once again to turn the searchlight inwards- before we lose everything.

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"Cleanliness is next to Godliness. We can no more seek God's blessings with an unclean body than with an unclean mind "

(Young India , November 19, 1925)

This oft quoted saying of Mahatma Gandhi keeps coming back, to inspire and motivate. Gandhiji's devotion to a clean and healthy India, is brought out in this comprehensive title. Interwoven with quotes and photographs, this book gives an insight into Gandhiji's thoughts and writings on the importance of sanitation.

The author, Sudarshan Iyengar, a member of the Gandhi Heritage Mission , who has also been associated with water and sanitation campaigns in Gujarat, draws our attention to Gandhiji's views on this important subject in this handy book . Shri Iyengar was formerly Vice Chancellor of the Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad, the university founded by Mahatma Gandhi.



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